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DISENGENDERING ECOFEMINISM

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In an important analysis and refinement of ecofeminist theory, *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature*,¹ Australian environmental philosopher/activist, Val Plumwood, maps out many of the permutations and rivulets of the major streams in ecofeminist thought. She also analyses the ecological implications of the Platonic and Cartesian intellectual traditions, laying to rest the claim that environmental thought has benign roots in Western patriarchy, but for an understandable touch of slavery and misogyny. Further, she shows how some contemporary green philosophies, such as animal rights and some supporters of deep ecology, still bear the imprint of these patriarchal roots. Contrary to the anti-elitist values expressed in the book, the style and vocabulary is not very accessible to lay readers, but it is nonetheless assured a place among the growing number of important works in environmental theory, and is a must for those seriously engaged in deconstructing and subverting the dominant paradigm. What sets this book apart from other ecofeminist works, however, is that Plumwood recasts the ecofeminist paradigm in gender-neutral terms. The question I raise here is whether such a 'disengendered' version of ecofeminism is, on balance, a good idea. First, however, it may be necessary to sketch out a rough definition of ecofeminism for the convenience of some readers.

Ecofeminism is as broad a paradigm as the patriarchal one it seeks to supplant, with nearly as many interpretations as there are ecofeminists. In a nutshell, however, it is the application of feminist theory to the ecological crisis. The basic notion is that social oppression and environmental exploitation are inextricably linked to fundamental social constructs that have co-evolved with patriarchal power relations. In Western patriarchal thought, for example, reality has been construed in terms of dualisms, such as culture/nature, reason/emotion, subject/object, science/art, public/private, hard/soft, mind/body and so on. These basic dualisms are gendered and hierarchical, in that the latter side of each pair has been associated with the feminine and devalued in the culture.

'Culture' (or order) has been until very recently a male domain, while the idea of 'nature' (or chaos) has been conceived as female and has included women as a caste, slaves, indigenous peoples, non-white races and animals. This association with nature has been used to justify their exploitation; they have been considered to have less inherent value than their more powerful counterparts and therefore to exist for the fulfilment of (elite, white) Man's purposes and needs. As 'lower orders of being', their dominance and control has seemed preordained or natural. This cultural devaluation of the natural, biological and feminine has been reflected on the psychological level. There is a strong tendency, especially among men, to try to deny dependency upon, distance oneself from, and control

the 'female' aspects of their internal and external nature. Ecofeminism explores how this androcentric dualism has shaped our theories, institutions, our sense of self, and even our relationship to nature and community.

Most ecofeminists identify the concept of 'gender' (the social construction of sex) as the conceptual glue between the above interlocking sets of dualisms, and the term 'patriarchy' to refer to their systemic expression in social and institutional structures. Such terms have been received by many as highly provocative or even confrontational, because these subjects are still taboo (taboos being things that generally support power relations). Plumwood instead chooses to substitute the term 'mastery' for patriarchal consciousness, and the 'master-slave' dualism for dominance relationships as overarching concepts in her deconstruction of Western thought. Rather than use gender as a metaphorical icon of value, therefore, she reduces it to the male/female dichotomy, relegating the concept to just another means by which people are categorised, much in the way that race and class have been used to marginalize people.

Ecofeminist theory, when framed this way, loses its shock effect - which is arguably a good thing. The disengendered terminology makes the paradigm more palatable and academically kosher. While this de-politicised version may broaden its appeal, however, it may simultaneously narrow its true transformative potential. Further, this disengendered typology may reinvent the mind/body dualism upon which Plumwood focuses and which is notably absent from most ecofeminist literature. In this work, therefore, the biological dimension of human psychology and behaviour (and which we share with other animals) is split off from the cerebral and disregarded. Plumwood challenges the limitations of Western rationalism with a rationalism of the same order, which presents no difficulty, but risks losing a key ecofeminist insight in the process. After all, the pervasiveness of mastery or dominance and the use by the master of dualistic thinking in manipulating the populace is not a new idea to those involved in social justice movements; and certainly institutionalised forms of slavery are at least publicly disapproved of, even when practiced enthusiastically. The virtues of equality and freedom from tyranny have long been taught in such ubiquitous sites as the pulpit - yet these exhortations have done little to reduce hierarchical social relations. Why would they work now? It is the - until recently invisible - omnipresence of gender within these hierarchical dualisms that creates the potential for new insights and the basis for a new human identity and social transformation.

In the desire to displace gender as a pivotal element in her theory, Plumwood appears to overlook the central role of both sex and gender in the motivations behind the seeking and abusing power. For example, in Plumwood's extensive deconstruction of the master-slave relationship, the power drive on the part of the master is presumed but not theorised. Power and dominance are not really defined; they just present themselves as something that pervades human relationships. Perhaps this is because power cannot be adequately deconstructed

in a gender-blind and a-sexual analysis?

Surely humans have many biological and instinctual behaviour patterns related to sex and reproduction that they share with a mix of other animals, though we are not as yet able to disentangle these phenomena. In Plumwood's theory, however, the human appears connected to nature on the cerebral plane only, either by experiencing nature existentially or by understanding nature intellectually. In her disengendered theory, the human is a creature without sex drives or personal insecurities, moved only by cerebral constructs and sensory experience. But is this not a denial of the nature within? I for one find it hard to believe that the power drive we witness daily does not predate the introduction of rational logic in ancient Greece, as is implied. It seems unlikely that power relations originated in modes of reason or that they can be extirpated by new conceptualisations alone.

This begs the question as to the strategic impact of a disengendered ecofeminism. Can people be motivated to abandon relations of personal power, and the value systems that legitimise them, because new cerebral constructs are presented which should be preferred by rational people? Ironically, Plumwood's model of the human is, in this respect, not that unlike the rational information processor of traditional management and decision theory who makes optimal choices based on objective analyses. Have not many malestream green theorists already articulated the view that the remedy to dominance relations or mastery is a new way of perceiving reality? It may indeed be a necessary condition, but it is not sufficient.

Rational arguments and intellectual frameworks are important, but if we want to motivate people to take on board these new insights, we need to recognize the human as a complex blending of emotional needs as well as ideologies. In a power-based society, or 'patriarchy', many people feel they can only ensure the provision of personal needs (such as sex, love and belonging) through material accumulation and the display of wealth. Until we face the problem of hyper-masculine identification in the self and the culture, I suspect that there will be no fundamental social change. Were the masculine identity delinked from power, and the feminine identity delinked from submission and self-sacrifice, the basis of personal relationships could begin to change from dominance to reciprocity.

Further evidence of a split between the nature within and the nature without is in Plumwood's tendency to selectively mix up sex and 'gender'. For example, she says that in Cartesianism, "the excluded and inferiorised contrast of 'pure' thought includes much more than the feminine. Its contrasts now include not only animality and the body itself, but also material reality, practical activity, change, the emotions, sympathy and subjectivity" (p. 118). But these activities and attributes are associated with the feminine and/or domestic sphere (whether performed or experienced by women or men) in contrast with abstract, dispassionate, 'objective' thought which has been the preserve of the Male. As expressed by Otto Weininger: "a female genius is a contradiction in

terms, for genius is simply intensified, perfectly developed, universally conscious maleness".² Of course rich white women are often inexcusably guilty of racism, classism, and hostility to nature! Even in their role as an oppressor, however, they are conceived as a subset of (and inferior to) their male *counterpart*.³ In short, the gendered nature of hierarchical dualism is not a one-dimensional concept. Like DNA, it is capable of almost infinite combinations and complexity. (This is not to reduce everything to gender; I will be among the first to celebrate when gender loses its force and we arrive in a post-feminist world.)

Could the disengendering of ecofeminism serve to make racial and ethnic injustice more central to ecofeminist theory? Some earlier ecofeminist works have dealt with these forms of oppression only by implication. However, many others such as Maria Mies and Vandana Shiva have made colonisation and race central, without losing site of the central role of gender in these relations. Alternatively, could the disengendering of ecofeminism help to rescue the insights themselves from the false stereotypes to which the word 'ecofeminism' has been associated? Plumwood employs such stereotypes herself as a negative background against which to set her own work in relief. She thus caricatures a hypothetical (and, I suggest, nonexistent) type of ecofeminism which seeks simply to reverse the male/female dualism and rely on the goodness of women to save the world (pp. 9-10). This view, if anyone subscribed to it, would not be consistent with ecofeminism, which is fundamentally a critique of this dualistic way of thinking.

The only primary source for this hypothetical form of ecofeminism (or 1970s 'cultural feminism') is a quote by Charlene Spretnak who writes: "identifying the dynamics - largely fear and resentment - *behind* the dominance of male over female is the *key to comprehending* every expression of patriarchal culture with its hierarchical, militaristic, mechanistic, industrial forms". (My italics.) This hyperbole from a newsletter for lay readers does not, by my reading, purport to subsume racism, colonialism, and militarism under sexism. Instead, it points to the basic feminist strategic insight that 'the personal is political' and that repressed emotions are a barrier to comprehended intellectual concepts which threaten one's place in a social order. To ecofeminists, the structural and psychological are synergistically related; both must be transformed.

In showing that Western patriarchal society holds women to be closer to nature, and arguing that this precept has been implicated in most environmental and social problems today, ecofeminists are criticising essentialism, not endorsing it. To suggest we affirm that which our society has demeaned as 'feminine' attributes (nurturance, empathy, intuition) and to advocate a rebalancing is hardly to advocate (reverse) sex discrimination. For women to see themselves as aligned with nature is certainly not to exclude others - that would be totally inconsistent with a concern for protecting nature. Can we have a cake and eat it too? Can we have a disengendered ecofeminism and transcend the impulse to marginalise that cluster of denigrated values and attributes associated with the feminine?

Perhaps Plumwood's special contribution, and a task for which she is highly qualified, has been to stack up ecofeminism against the framework of Western logic, against which, I believe, ecofeminism holds up well. Whether the disengendered terminology (eg. the term 'mastery' replacing 'patriarchy') will result in making ecofeminist ideas more widespread remains to be seen. I suspect that it would only enable the 'malestream' to absorb the transformative potential of the new paradigm into a framework that is more amenable to the interests of the 'master'.

1. Val Plumwood, 1993, *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature* (Routledge, NY and London) ISBN 0-415-06810X.
2. Otto Weininger, 1903, *Sex and Character* (Source: Tama Starr, 1991, *The "Natural Inferiority" of Women* NY: Poseidon Press, at p. 219).
3. This is not to simplify other forms of oppression or to suggest that sexism should have a priority. It is to suggest instead that sexism is as pervasive.

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