

Fighting the Patriarchy to Save the Planet

Article by Jeanne Burgart Goutal, Laury-Anne Cholez

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Ecofeminist thinking seeks to shed light on the ways in which different forms of oppression reinforce and sustain each other. Jeanne Burgart Goutal's book *Être écoféministe : théories et pratiques (Being an Ecofeminist: Theory and Practice)* (L'Échappée, 2020) was awarded the French Political Ecology Foundation's book prize this year. In it she explains how the ecofeminist movement sets out to challenge the dominant system as a whole, by identifying the interconnections between struggles – feminist, environment, anti-racist, and others.

Laury-Anne Cholez: There's a lot of talk about ecofeminism, but the concept still seems poorly understood, both by ecologists and feminists. How do you define it?

Jeanne Burgart Goutal: Ecofeminism isn't a faddish concept, but a movement born in the 1970s^[1], driven by collectives and real struggles around different issues. What they have in common is the conviction that there are inextricable links between the ecological crisis and the patriarchy. According to ecofeminists, the exploitation of nature and male domination have deep shared roots, and use similar mechanisms such as objectification, devaluation, and violence.

More broadly, their analysis draws links between all forms of domination, be it class, "race", North over South, or any other kind. At the moment, there's much talk of intersectionality. But connecting environmental and social justice issues was already a demand of ecofeminism. For example, by rejecting implicitly sexist and neo-colonialist forms of environmentalism like the forced sterilisation of women in India in the name of population control. Or by refusing to celebrate when the emancipation of some women comes at the cost of negative social or environmental consequences.

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Advances in equality between men and women have therefore been achieved on the backs of the most precarious, those who look after the children and the home.

This is what mainstream feminism overlooks. Sociologically, the best-known feminist theorists were often bourgeois or middle-class white women who thought about things based on their own position in society, reproducing patriarchal responses. Ecofeminism

seeks to make visible what has been made invisible yet is indispensable to our lives and the economy, like domestic work (preparing meals, looking after the home and children, and so on), the overexploited labour on the other side of the world to make items for our everyday lives, or the work to regenerate ecosystems. We've seen this since ancient Greece with the divide between free men and slaves, who were given the tasks considered beneath humans because they were shared with animals. We need to stop trying to offload subsistence tasks onto other people and take responsibility for them collectively. But this calls into question the image of success: parents aren't going to say to their kids that they should become a dustman, small holder, or cleaning lady. We should value these vital tasks more, both morally and financially, and undoubtedly share them more fairly, even going so far as a new division of labour.

There are many critiques of ecofeminism: that it's too idealist, too esoteric...

These critiques helped to discredit ecofeminism in the 1990s. For example, [Janet Biehl](#) denounced ecofeminism as a goddess cult, explaining that it was a school of thought that wasn't political enough. There's some truth to all of these critiques. Admittedly, there are ecofeminist texts that are essentialist or spiritualist, but this is by no means the whole movement. There are also clearly constructivist texts with a distinctly Marxist analysis. The vast majority of ecofeminist authors deconstruct the traditional association between "women" and "nature". They analyse the way in which the patriarchy has historically been built by casting aside women as part of nature, but they don't endorse this association. For example, the sociologist [Ariel Salleh](#) clearly explains that not only are genders a social construction, but sexes too: for her, they are continuums rather than binary divides. So we're a very long way from essentialism!

As for [Maria Mies](#) or [Rosemary Ruether](#), they reinterpret the concepts of Marx from a feminist standpoint, making the sexual division of labour the foundation of the patriarchy. Although they're also interested in the ideological, cultural, and symbolic constructions that underpin the patriarchy, they take a strongly materialist approach, based on the analysis of relationships between production and reproduction: it's the polar opposite of idealism!

Everyone who criticises ecofeminism should read the ecofeminists. Furthermore, what's most fascinating about ecofeminism is exactly what it's criticised for: the spiritual side with rituals, and witches. This interests people and the media because it's original, it sells, and it's seductive.

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Are these critiques a way of making ecofeminism more inoffensive ?

As Eve Chiapello and Luc Boltanski explain in [The New Spirit of Capitalism](#), the system co-opts everything that tries to destroy it. In this case, capitalism is trying to sanitise ecofeminism, to strip out everything that's most political, subversive, and anti-globalist about it. We even see this in international institutions. Today, including the words "gender"

and “environment” will get you grants. It’s the new politically correct discourse that allows global “development” policies to be dressed up, with funding for women’s cooperatives or microloans in India or Africa, for example. Yet it doesn’t fundamentally change the system, as ecofeminism seeks to.

Ecofeminism links different forms of exploitation: of women by men, of nature by humans. Does it also address colonial domination?

Yes, ecofeminist theories have always drawn the link between sexism, racism, patriarchy, and colonisation. While questions of race and colonialism are at the heart of ecofeminist writing, there is actually a real difficulty in bringing together the anti-racist movement and the environmentalist movement. Often, the activists fighting for these causes don’t move in the same circles, don’t speak the same language, or share the same touchpoints. We have, however, seen attempts at building bridges, like the alliance between the French anti-racist Adama movement and the climate generation in July 2020 in Beaumont-sur-Oise [Val-d’Oise]. But, for some Parisians, crossing the ring road is never simple. Nevertheless, these efforts don’t always have to be in the same vein.

Would you say that ecofeminism is more radical than theso-called “liberal” feminism of the 20th century, which argued for equality between men and women without challenging the structures that led to this domination?

Yes, because ecofeminism talks about the interconnections between different struggles and seeks to challenge the system as a whole. It’s a major point of difference with liberal feminism. It isn’t a fight for more women to lead companies that prey on natural resources, or to be in parliament to pass oppressive laws, or for the social advancement of a few privileged women. The idea isn’t to get to the top of the pyramid but rather to transform this very structure and instead build a more cooperative, circular, and democratic system.

In the history of social struggles, women have often been on the front line. Yet their presence is often rendered invisible in the history books. How can we change this?

School should be at the heart of this undertaking. Since at least the 1970s, there have been many feminist books that place the role of women centre stage in history, prehistory, the middle ages, in various non-patriarchal cultures or in artistic creation. These works exist but are not circulated in popular culture or at school. Only politicised people are aware of them. For example, in the mainstream media, there’s much talk about witches, but not the history of struggles against extractivism or deforestation, which are very often led by women, because it’s too militant.

Which of today’s ecofeminists inspire you?

The nuclear question has recently reemerged in France, as seen in Bure [a village in north-eastern France where a disposal site for nuclear waste is planned], in a way that reconnects with the original demands of the ecofeminist movement. Some ZADs [zones à défendre – occupations by activists of “zones to defend” to prevent destructive developments] also embody in their own way utopias similar to those of the early days of ecofeminism, with its very “alternative” side. We are also seeing ecofeminism have a growing influence on

everyday life. For example, an important battleground is intimacy, the body, and sexuality: young women are trying to “depatriarchise” intimate relationships. Food is also at the heart of today’s movement with, for example, the parents’ association Front de mères [Mothers’ Front] that is fighting for a vegetarian alternative in school canteens in the Seine-Saint-Denis region. But it seems to be in South America that environmental fights led by women are most enduring, even if they don’t necessarily consider themselves ecofeminists.

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You’ve been studying ecofeminism for around a decade now. How do you explain this recent burgeoning interest in this subject?

There’s been a snowball effect with the convergence of the climate marches and #MeToo movement. The ecological emergency is increasingly apparent to everyone and, at the same time, we’re seeing a return of feminism, long considered uncool. What’s more, since the lockdown, there’s been a sort of general aspiration for a change in the system, with the impression that it’s run its course. The political elites don’t understand it and are not listening to what’s coming out of civil society. Faced with this narrow technocratic politics, it’s understandable that the lure of utopia might become irresistible.

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Do you think that young women discovering feminism today are interested in ecofeminist theories?

I have the impression that there’s a politicisation, or at least an atmosphere much more conducive to utopia than when I was their age. Perhaps in my day the prospects for the future were a bit more tolerable? I think of my students [Burgart Goutal teaches philosophy in Marseille] who are totally bewildered. They don’t understand what lies ahead for them and adults don’t have an answer for them. Nobody can find their bearings anymore. Because they have the impression that nothing really works anymore, they find it fairly easy to draw the links between different problems. And this bewilderment can lead them to become radicalised in one direction or another.

With the success of Alice Coffin’s book Le génie lesbien, (The Lesbian Genius) and Pauline Harmange’s I Hate Men, some suggest that “misandry” is growing among some feminist activists.

In a way, I understand them because by reading and dissecting the mechanisms of the patriarchy in all its violence, it's sometimes hard to keep calm. But I think that this strategy is counterproductive. Ecofeminism was born in the 1970s, as part of the peace and love countercultural movement and with hippies who wanted peace and reconciliation. Misandry may be a first step towards a sort of awakening, but it can't be a goal in itself. You can't remain permanently engaged in struggle and opposition. One of the tenets of ecofeminism is precisely to move beyond this duality and these oppositions. I'm more interested in seeing how we can learn to live together happily.

This interview was originally published by *Reporterre*.

[1] First theorised by Françoise d'Eaubonne, author of *Le Féminisme ou la mort (Feminism or Death)*



Jeanne Burgart Goutal is a philosophy teacher, yoga instructor, and author. Her book *Être écoféministe : théories et pratiques (Being an Ecofeminist: Theory and Practice)* (L'Échappée, 2020) seeks to identify the strands of thought linking all forms of domination to better fight against them.

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