

Progress Isn't Progress Unless It's Fair

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Angélica Velasco Sesma draws on insights from ecofeminism to urge caution when it comes to wholeheartedly embracing the advances of science and technology, questioning whether their promise of progress means progress for all. To prevent the crystallisation of existing hierarchies and oppression, techno-scientific advances must keep freedom, equality, and sustainability as guiding principles.

There is no denying that technological and industrial revolutions have triggered tremendous social progress over the course of history, from the way machines revolutionised farming to the life-saving impact of penicillin. We can now fly around the planet at 800 kilometres per hour, or put our feet up while machines wash our clothes and dishes. Nevertheless, these facts do not make it unnecessary to carry out a more rigorous analysis of the side effects of these revolutions and – more importantly – of the Fourth Industrial Revolution underway today [read more on the [Fourth Industrial Revolution](#)]. To question the notion of “progress”, one only need look at the alarming statistics on air quality in cities, soil desertification, large-scale deforestation, the irreversible loss of biodiversity, and new and increased rates of diseases – both physical and psychological – that are here to stay.

An oppressive status quo

We could start by asking why this so-called progress has not led to greater improvement in environmental and human wellbeing. Why is our future – according to the scientific reports of various international organisations – seriously threatened? Why do UN resolutions warn, in no uncertain terms, of the need to drastically reduce greenhouse gas emissions while the majority of the world's governments look the other way? The answer lies in the fundamental principles of our economic and social system, capitalism.

In a world where science, technology, and culture continue to advance as ends in and of themselves (or as a means to generate profit), nature has been relegated to a subordinate position and must endure the consequences of this progress.

Western thought is distinctly dualistic, from Pythagoras in the classical world to Descartes and Kant in modernity and the Enlightenment. That is to say, it is built on a foundation of opposing pairs that create and shape our reality. Categories such as culture and science do not walk alone but are always accompanied by their opposite. When thinking about *culture*, its opposite *nature* appears; *emotion* emerges as the opposite of *reason*; the opposite of *human* would be *animal*; our mind is in *opposition* to our *body*; *man* is the opposite of *woman*; *mechanical* versus *organic*; *public* versus *private*; and so it goes on.^[1] Importantly, this dualistic system is in turn a system of domination: one half of the pair is considered superior to the other and, therefore, its domination over the other is legitimate.

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Take the following example: humans are in opposition to animals and as a result exploit them, both symbolically and literally, as and when they wish – think of meat eating and displays such as circuses, zoos, and bullfighting. With the culture/nature pairing, we can observe the domination of culture over nature in how natural areas are destroyed to accommodate large construction projects, and beaches turned into huge tourist resorts.

The feminist movement has drawn attention to the unequivocal structural domination of men over women throughout history to the present day. Reason is considered superior to emotion: “reasonable” always wins out over “passionate”; to “come to one’s senses” is to come around to what is deemed best. In the stoic and Judeo-Christian tradition, the mind must dominate the body to avoid succumbing to excess or sin. And so on, with each set of pairs replicating this relationship, and coming together to construct a reality that justifies the dominance of one over the other.

Scrutinising these relationships reveals that the oppressor categories coincide with the others in their group, as do the oppressed. In other words, the categories *man, culture, human, reason, mind*, etc. are seen as superior to *woman, nature, animal, emotion, body*, etc. There is not only a vertical relationship between each category, but those occupying the same position also interrelate horizontally. With this in mind, man would be related to culture, humanity, reason, and the mind, while woman would be associated with nature, emotion, animal, and the body. These categories are interrelated to legitimise their position as inferior and, by extension, their oppression, whilst safeguarding the privileges of the former.^[2]

We can see this in how the exclusion and subjugation of the female population has historically been founded upon the naturalisation of women, i.e. the conviction that women are inherently closer to nature, subject to their passions, and incapable of autonomous critical thinking. Feminism has exposed the injustice implicit in the exclusion of women from humanity. The movement has also argued that women are rational beings and that differences in character traits and abilities are due to upbringing rather than innate essence. If women are more in touch with their emotions and inclined to take on familial duties, it is not a result of something inherently feminine. Rather, it is the result of the confinement of women to the domestic sphere and a socialisation process that drives them towards caregiving roles. The feminist movement is in this way a move to return women to the sphere of humanity.

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Ecofeminism, meanwhile, has gone a step further. Starting with a critique of the subjugation of women, it also understands that human beings – both men and women – form part of nature. It aims to break down the hierarchies implicit in these foundational dualisms. It goes beyond the demand that women be included in the realm of the “human”, but also concerns itself with underscoring humanity’s inclusion in the fabric of life and to ensure the protection of nature itself.

Ecofeminism reveals the myriad connections that exist between the repression of women and the exploitation of nature. It demands instead a broad ideal of justice: equality between men and women, but also eco-justice, respect for animals, and a new way of understanding one another as a species. Ecofeminism, then, is the branch of

feminism that addresses the environmental crisis and our relationship to nature from a gendered perspective. It also looks at the interconnection between the oppressed parties with the understanding that all these discriminations (whether based on gender, race, class, sexual orientation, or species) stem from the same logic: that those deemed different from the norm can be justifiably dominated.

Scrutinising science

With this in mind, we come to reflect on science: what exactly is it and how does it influence our thinking? Science and technology take their place among the dominating categories alongside *man*, *culture*, *reason*, and *mind*. An example of how these associations can shape thought is overpopulation discourse, whereby a scientific diagnosis of the pressures on planetary resources informs a politics that advocates lesser sexual and reproductive autonomy for women in the Global South.

This scientific way of thinking about the world finds its roots in the Renaissance, a time that saw a shift from an animistic to a mechanistic science [read more on the [Renaissance roots of modernity](#)]. That is to say, from understanding nature as a living organism, with animals and plants as active subjects, to understanding nature as structured and ordered by men, there to be exploited at will in order to extract as much knowledge as possible regardless of limits. Nature becomes the object of deductive reasoning, to be analysed and exploited for and by the active subject “man”. We witness a shift from nature as a living organism to what Carolyn Merchant has called the “death of nature”.^[3]

When thinking about this modern conception of science and its place in the Fourth Industrial Revolution, this begs the question: does the science’s mechanistic perspective work in favour of sexism and androcentrism, or does it fight for its eradication? These days, we cannot think of knowledge as something separate from power. The patterns that position masculine over feminine, nature over culture, are repeated when it comes to science: knowledge should be objective, divorced from feelings and aimed at controlling the object of study: nature. This is what physicist Evelyn Fox Keller calls “static objectivity” in contrast to “dynamic objectivity”, which is associated with empathy, feelings, and a connection to the natural world.^[4]

Opting for a different understanding of science does not necessarily mean side-stepping the notion of “truth” or refusing its existence altogether, just questioning the way it is conceived.^[5] The criticism is aimed at science’s failure to take into consideration the eco-social repercussions of advances and that, as a result, exacerbates or perpetuates the hierarchies between man and woman, culture-science and nature, human and animal. If science does not break away from this oppressive conceptual framework, the Fourth Industrial Revolution will only serve to reinforce the existing structures.

Ecofeminist proposals

How can we overcome this mechanistic science? How can we ensure that scientific and technological progress has ecofeminist horizons in this Fourth Industrial Revolution? Critical ecofeminist Alicia Puleo makes several proposals: a precautionary approach to science and technology; equality; women’s autonomy; respect for animals; and intercultural learning.^[6] This perspective is neither technophobia nor uncritical worship of techno-solutions. It is about promoting – and benefiting from – scientific advances that have a more holistic vision of their means and ends, that do not separate wellbeing from human dignity, and that do not cause suffering for any species or the natural environment. It also argues for progress to be transparent and democratic, and not just aimed at improving the present but factoring in the human rights of future generations.

Scanning the recent history of women and science, gynaecology – a medical discipline exclusive to women – has

implemented a theory and practice that are extremely invasive for women's bodies from institutions that are, moreover, fully masculinised. The result is men making decisions about women's bodies. Feminist backlash to this emerged in the early 1970s in Boston, US, where a group of women met weekly to discuss their bodies and health. Tired of only being able to learn from "vertical" androcentric science, they created the sexuality and reproductive health manual *Our Bodies, Ourselves*, inspired by their gatherings. They did not disregard the technological expertise of male-led medicine, but they did value their ability to teach one another and to learn "horizontally" from their experiences. That such groups exist is a damning indictment of a patriarchy that prevents women from open discussion about science and their own health.

There is a need for more thoughtful reflection on the division of tasks and responsibilities so that true progress will be the equal distribution of all care work.

If we wish to ensure that prevailing patriarchal values – that view women as an object of study rather than a knowledgeable active subject – are not sustained and perpetuated, the Fourth Industrial Revolution must promote rigorous debate from a feminist perspective on the benefits and risks of new advances. Nor should technological advances continue to create machines that facilitate the tasks historically conferred to women in order to free them from these jobs. Rather, there is a need for more thoughtful reflection on the division of tasks and responsibilities so that true progress will be the equal distribution of all care work.

Both nature and women have been and continue to be exploited and underappreciated by the dominant economic system – though it is worth noting that socialism also reproduced these patterns. Despite providing the basic infrastructure for men to develop their work and accumulate capital, neither women nor nature have received the necessary recognition to give equal value to the tasks performed.

Hybridising boundaries as a route to justice?

If we think of the *cyborg* as a hybrid of machine and person, it is easy to break down the boundary between, at the very least, the pairing that is and always has been so influential on how we understand and carry out science: machine/organism. According to the US feminist scholar Donna Haraway, an asexual cyborg blurs any boundary between man/woman, machine/organism, culture/nature, and so on.^[7] By destroying the existence of these pairs themselves, the imposed hierarchy between them is also destroyed. The cyborg has the potential to become an emancipatory figure for all oppressed categories, simply because it hybridises one category with the other. If machine and organism coexist in a single element, then we must also accept hybridisation between human and animal, or between man and woman. It would no longer be possible to distinguish or isolate one of the elements to be dominated; instead, all would be contained within one entity, unable to be oppressed by itself.

However, Haraway's proposal of emancipation through cyborg does have potential setbacks. Ecofeminist philosopher Vanda Shiva believes that before allowing the blurring of boundaries, there must be an understanding of what is being protected and what is being freed in each of these transgressions. One example is the blurring of the boundary between animal and woman, which has resulted in the creation of even stronger models of oppression. Does animalising women give them their freedom, or does it intensify their discrimination? In this case, hybridisation does not align with the objectives of ecofeminism [read more on [transhumanism](#)].

It is also worth thinking about a cyborg that has no boundary between machine/organism but is sexed as a woman to satisfy male desires of female physical attractiveness: does this end male domination over women despite hybridising the boundary between machine and organism? Another well-known example in recent history is the

case of Mad Cow Disease. In a transgression of the carnivore/herbivore boundary, cows developed an illness due to being fed animal products – with serious consequences for both the animals and for humans. Thus, blurring boundaries can in some cases serve to liberate and protect an oppressed party, but in other cases can make that situation worse and bring about negative consequences for all or some of the parties.

An ecofeminist Fourth Industrial Revolution

The Fourth Industrial Revolution must make room for an in-depth and democratic debate about the eco-social consequences it will – and already has – bring about. Any progress that does not pay heed to morality will only serve to reproduce these roles of domination and to cement or worsen existing hierarchies. Seizing the Fourth Industrial Revolution as an opportunity, a new technological society must be created that, despite differentiating between nature and culture, appreciates each of them as distinct though not hierarchical, giving value to both, and being aware – and acting accordingly – that the actions of one can destroy the other.

The same goes for patriarchal and species perspectives that discriminate against women in favour of men, and non-human animals in favour of humans. The freedom, equality, and sustainability of ecofeminism must fuel and nourish the Fourth Industrial Revolution to ensure that, instead of reproducing the existing model, it opts instead for a radically different model that holds respect for life – of whatever kind – at its core.

This article has been adapted by EcoPolítica from the chapter by Angélica Velasco Sesma in the book *La Cuarta Revolución Industrial desde una mirada ecosocial*.

[1] Val Plumwood (1993). *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature*. London; New York : Routledge.

[2] See: Armelle Le Bras-Chopard (2000). *Le zoo des philosophes*. Paris : Plon ; Charles Patterson (2008). *¿Por qué maltratamos tanto a los animales?* Lleida : Milenio.

[3] Carolyn Merchant (1981). *The Death of Nature: Woman, Ecology, and the Scientific Revolution* San Francisco : Harper and Row.

[4] Evelyn Fox Keller (1985). *Reflections on Gender and Science*. Yale University Press.

[5] Alicia Puleo (2000). *Filosofía, género y pensamiento crítico*. Valladolid : Universidad de Valladolid.

[6] The socialist ecofeminism of Ariel Salleh and Mary Mellor and the deconstructive ecofeminism of Karen Warren and Val Plumwood both approach this question from differing standpoints, but the focus of this article is on Alicia Puleo's critical ecofeminism.

[7] Dona Haraway (1991). *Simians, Cyborgs and Women: the Reinvention of Nature*. New York: Routledge.



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