

Françoise d'Eaubonne and the Imperfect Foundation of Ecofeminist Thought

Article by Agathe Ranc

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In 1974, the French thinker, author, and activist Françoise d'Eaubonne made a link between the exploitation of nature and the subjugation of women. This is the story of an idea which, after a detour via the United States, is beginning to take root in France: eco-feminism.

The terrorists schlepped about in an orange Renault 4, and learnt everything about using explosives from a physics and chemistry textbook stolen from the Gibert Jeune bookshop. It was in an empty building at the Fessenheim nuclear power station, then still under construction in the east of France, that they went through with it. On 2 May 1975, two homemade bombs exploded, the water system was damaged and construction was delayed by a few months. "The pinnacle of my life," Françoise d'Eaubonne concluded in her diary, "but I don't want to talk about it."

The militant feminist, former resistance fighter, essayist and novelist was then 55 years old; she pulled off the job with two friends. If you talked to her about terrorism, she would call it "counter-violence". Nothing more than "turning the enemy's weapon against him".

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For her, nuclear power represented "the patriarchy and the thirst for power that gave birth to it".

If nuclear power aroused in her a desire to plant bombs, it is because it represented "the patriarchy and the thirst for absolute power that brings death". The year before, Eaubonne, already the author of dozens of works of fiction and feminist theory, published *Feminism or Death*. Alerted to the dangers of nuclear power by a friend, she also read René Dumont, the first green candidate for French presidency, who in his book *L'Utopie ou la mort* (Utopia or Death) responded to the conclusions of the Meadows report on the limits to growth.

She had the following intuition: the struggles of environmentalism and feminism are not so different. This gave us an urgently needed neologism: ecofeminism. This is the idea that "the patriarchy is responsible for both environmental disasters (through overproduction and the capitalist logic) and the subjugation of women (by appropriating women's bodies)," explains historian Caroline Goldblum, author of *Françoise d'Eaubonne et ecofeminism* (Françoise d'Eaubonne and Ecofeminism).

In her essay, Françoise d'Eaubonne denounced the “unlimitedism” of patriarchal society, the “phallogocratic excessive breeding” that leads to overpopulation. She called for a birth strike and, above all, “a female society of non-power (and not empowerment of women)”.

And the reaction in academia and among environmentalists and feminists? None, or very little. Françoise d'Eaubonne, who was not an insider, had little support. And “her militant tone, [as well as] her radical and revolutionary approach discredited her as an analyst. As an ecofeminist, she broke with the very rational approach to the living world, suggests Myriam Bahaffou, a graduate student in philosophy and ecofeminist activist, who together with Julie Gorecki, an activist and graduate student at Berkeley, wrote the preface to the new French edition of *Feminism or Death in 2020*.

Françoise d'Eaubonne had one hell of a reputation which did not help advance her ideas.

“Unlike most ecofeminist theorists, Eaubonne was not an academic. Her theory was based directly on her experience in various activist movements,” explains Julie Gorecki.

The story begins with a childhood in Toulouse in an impoverished bourgeois family with a Christian anarchist father and a mother who was the daughter of Carlist Spanish revolutionary. In hindsight, d'Eaubonne's adolescent exploits are early signs of manifest destiny; she won a short-story competition at the age of 13 and scrawled “Vive le féminisme” with a wet shoe on a convent floor at the age of 11.

Campaigning alongside Michel Foucault

The former child prodigy's activism began in the resistance and continued in the Communist Party, which she left 10 years later in 1956, disagreeing with its position on Algeria. She then joined the Mouvement de libération des femmes (Women's Liberation Movement), signed the manifesto of the 343 women who declared in *Le Nouvel Observateur* that they had an abortion, campaigned against psychiatry and the death penalty alongside Michel Foucault, and co-founded the Front homosexuel d'action révolutionnaire (Homosexual Revolutionary Action Front). And she made this rule her own: “Not a day without a line”.

A prolific writer, she published biographies, science-fiction sagas, feminist essays, and collections of poems. In 1978, she founded the group Ecologie-Féminisme (Environmentalism-Feminism) to promote her new ideas in political circles. However, Françoise d'Eaubonne had one hell of a reputation which did not help advance her ideas. “She was seen as too radical – radioactive even,” explains biographer [Élise Thiébaud](#).

“Throughout her life, she fell out with lots of people,” says Caroline Goldblum. “She could be good company, but she was demanding, she was never quite on the same wavelength. You can't say that people were happy to see her turn up to activist meetings.”

Although made in France, it was abroad that the concept of ecofeminism took off from the

end of the 1970s. And especially in the United States, where major battles in defence of the environment were led by women – even if they did not necessarily call themselves ecofeminists. One of the most iconic of these was Women’s Pentagon Action, which took place in Arlington, Virginia in 1980.

“We want an end to the arms race. No more bombs. No more amazing inventions for death”, demanded 2000 activists. Joining this call were those against the “pervasive social power of the masculine ideal” and “violence in our streets and in our houses,” as well as for reproductive rights. In the UK, in the same context of nuclearisation and the arms race, thousands of women gathered at the Greenham Common Peace Camp, which lasted for 19 years.

They never missed the chance to remind us: it is the most deprived women who are hit hardest by pollution. In India, the women villagers of the Chipko movement opposed deforestation and the commercial use of the forest. Ecofeminist theory took shape in parallel to land struggles and activist writing. In 1980, the American philosopher and historian of science Carolyn Merchant published a seminal work: examining the scientific revolution of the 16th and 17th centuries. In *The Death of Nature*, she described how the ancient analogy between women and nature was turned against them. Nature — inert matter — was subjugated, as were women. Those who resisted, the “witches”, were persecuted.

Outside of Europe, from India, Africa to North America, ecofeminism was also tinged with a spiritual streak that complicated its return to France: local feminism, informed by a materialist tradition, struggled to look positively upon the neopaganism of California’s Starhawk, whose approach combined spirituality and politics, pagan rituals, and land struggles. Moreover, through the connection that it makes between women and nature, ecofeminism was also often seen as “essentialising”. “Reversing stigma”, activists retort: it’s not about saying that women are, in essence, connected to the Earth, but that this closeness has been constructed socially... to devalue both at once.

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Rediscovery in France

Recognised across the Atlantic since the 1980s as the founder of ecofeminism, Françoise d’Eaubonne has only recently been rediscovered in France – as evidenced by the time it has taken to republish *Feminism or Death* [the new edition was published in 2020). “This could be described as the first real introduction to ecofeminism in France rather than a resurgence. It’s connected to the climate emergency, to the post-#MeToo feminist watershed, as well as to the emergence of other approaches to the world, like intersectional and decolonial changes,” suggests Myriam Bahaffou. “The history of ecofeminism is being rediscovered, that is to say, the history of women and gender minorities at the heart of struggles for environmental justice all over the world.”

It has resulted in somewhat of a publishing frenzy, with the publication of anthologies and seminal texts translated into French for the first time (by the likes of Starhawk, Val Plumwood, and Carolyn Merchant), as well as the essays and novels of Françoise d'Eaubonne (notably *Les Bergères de l'apocalypse*). Texts about witches that blend politics and spirituality are also seeing renewed interest. At protests, in ZAD (*zones à défendre* - zones to defend) and even among some presidential candidates, it's no longer rare to hear talk of ecofeminism.

But ecofeminism is not a party. It is instead a "merry mess" where very different theories and practices meet, says Jeanne Burgart Goutal, who wrote her thesis on it. Initially tempted to create a detailed map of the movement, she found herself faced with "a complex, varied web that has evolved through fierce debates, grappling with questions of time and place along the way."

It is then difficult to consider that something so plural could have a single "mother", a single "pioneer", as Françoise d'Eaubonne is often presented. "She was the first to give her theories the ecofeminism label. But indigenous feminists in the Global South and decolonial feminists have been connecting the Earth and gender for decades, without necessarily using this term," point out Julie Gorecki and Myriam Bahaffou, who cite the Native American Paula Gunn Allen, the Kenyan Wangari Maathai, and the Bolivian Julieta Paredes Carvajal.

For these scholars, ecofeminism cannot just concern itself with the intersection between the Earth and gender, while ignoring other social relations (such as class, disability and race): an "anticapitalist and transnational" ecofeminism that is a far cry from what we are seeing flourish in certain publications, podcasts and marketing products, which border on personal development. By way of example, the African Ecofeminist Collective, Africa's WoMin network, and the women and feminists at the heart of the Via Campesina international peasant movement.

To see herself feted as a pioneer, we can only imagine that Françoise d'Eaubonne, who died in 2005 in a home for retired artists, would have stared at you in disbelief. As well as her intellectual legacy, she also left behind dozens of books and plenty of bon mots that would make great protest placards: "It's better to have a date with women than with the Apocalypse."

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