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To Break Out of Strategic and Theoretical Impasses in the Face of the Climate Crisis

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

I – GRASPING ECOFEMINISM AS A MOVEMENT	3
The vague contours of the ecofeminist constituency	3
Ecofeminism as a response to apocalyptic times	4
Making the scale of disaster palpable	4
II – PROTEST AS A TRANSFORMATIVE MOMENT	5
Celebrating life here and now	5
Reclaiming HERstory	5
Ecofeminist struggles and legacies	6
III – THE CONTROVERSIES IN THE ECOFEMINIST MOVEMENT	7
An essentialist worldview?	7
Rejection of materialism?	9
IV - POLITICAL EXPRESSIONS	10
The influence of ecofeminism on social struggles	10
A new narrative for the left?	11
BIBLIOGRAPHY	13

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Ecofeminism: To Break Out of Strategic and Theoretical Impasses in the Face of the Climate Crisis

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An ecofeminist wind seems to have been blowing through protests in Europe in recent years, contributing to irrigate not only the critique they present, but also the imagination of new worlds waiting to arise. If ecofeminism has not yet gained traction enough to be socially quantified in the same way as political ecology, it however demonstrates significant potential from a theoretical and strategic perspective. The environmental and feminist movements seek to question anew both the convergence of struggles and our ways of thinking about forms of domination and their interweaving, get disrupted by these issues, offering fertile grounds for the development of ecofeminism. Furthermore, surveys on the climate marches in France show that women are overrepresented in such protests, with two-thirds of the demonstrators being female (Quantité Critique, 2019). Clearly, political environmentalism unfolds differently depending on gender. These elements show the need to examine the heuristic dimension of ecofeminism and reread our dissents, ways of fighting, and possible cross-class alliances with a fresh start in the current context of imminent ecological disaster.

I – GRASPING ECOFEMINISM AS A MOVEMENT

Ecofeminism encompasses a plurality of theoretical approaches, with different schools of thought which all attempt to think jointly about patriarchal dominance and ecological disaster yet oppose one another on many cleavage points. Academic and theoretical competition has exacerbated divisions and disagreements, most notably between spiritual and materialist, and between cultural and socialist ecofeminism. Philosopher Julie Cook goes as far as to evoke “the colonisation of ecofeminism by philosophy”. Therefore, before delving into these dissents, we first need to give an account of the ecofeminist movement and, to this end, to apprehend it through practices and struggles that have been called “ecofeminist”. Ecofeminism, of-

ten described as “grassroots” because it was born amidst protests — and more precisely within the anti-nuclear movement —, has emerged from the experience and stories of women’s struggles. Ecofeminist mobilisations have brought together women who, beyond their divides, agree on a common goal and choose to build alliances. Because ecofeminist actions are often carried out by multiple affinity groups who make their disagreements public, it would be more relevant to speak of a “divergence in solidarity” (Puig de la Bellacasa, 2003) to understand the ecofeminist alliances. Therefore, instead of holding homogeneous views of the movement, we must consider its plural history and how ecofeminist actions are diversely perceived depending on the socio-historical contexts.

The vague contours of the ecofeminist constituency

Among the chief criticisms levelled at ecofeminist activists, there are accusations of elitism: Ecofeminists are primarily viewed as forming a movement of privileged white Western women. Yet, since its very first concrete expressions, ecofeminism has pointed out the link between marginalisation processes affecting precarious people and their environmental health exposure. This is well illustrated by the 1978 protests in Love Canal, a working-class neighbourhood on the outskirts of Niagara Falls in the State of New York in the United States. Women were at the forefront of the protests against the local dumping of toxic chemical waste that caused a pollution that disastrously impacted the residents’ health and their no-longer habitable land. This struggle, which started ecofeminism and the movement for environmental justice in the United States, can be interpreted as a critical, context-dependent protest that does not depoliticise the environmental disaster but, on the contrary, seeks to cast light on injustices and environmental inequalities, and intends to name the culprits.

Yet, it is clear that ecofeminism from global South countries has led to a renewal and broadening of the ecofeminist scope by pointing to the Western-capitalist and colonial logic — and especially to its constant pressure for progress and development — as the central cause of environmental disasters and of the joint exploitation of nature, women and the colonised. In Kenya in 1977, for example, women of the Green Belt Movement launched a trailblazing action against land privatisation substituting to the communal land scheme, on which local subsistence relied. Their action also aimed to combat deforestation resulting from the logging and timber trade. Thousands of women rebelled and started to replant trees – mostly from native species –, turning into inspiring role models for ecofeminists worldwide. In India, the Chipko Movement is symbolic of a spontaneous action by women opposing the disruption of their habitat by the capitalist land grab of the commons. The movement, described and analysed by researcher and ecofeminist activist Vandana Shiva (1986), was initiated by village women in the Garhwal region in northern India, which adopted a new mode of action consisting in hugging trees, not only to prevent their felling, but also to show personal commitment to the environment.

Since the 1970s, as a matter of fact, those who stood up against environmental devastation were women. This did not result from any top-down theory on the interweaving of forms of dominance. Women maintain a unique relationship with the environment because of a subordinated position that implies many connections to the living place and to the other beings. This position makes them “sympathetic” in the first place as they are the first to suffer from environmental devastation. Ecofeminism is not about proclaiming a “natural” link between women and the living world, but about critically assessing women’s roles while yet trying to preserve their unique, so-to-say sympathetic take on the environment, the care of which they are responsible for in the first place. (See *Part 2*)

The contours of ecofeminism are not well defined because, on the one hand, there is much diversity within the movement, and, on the other hand, environmental struggles involving predominantly women are often called “ecofeminist” only in hindsight and by outsiders. Nevertheless, as we have seen, multiple ecofeminist currents and expressions have strengthened its critical reach and contributed to building a set of significant experiences that is instru-

mental to the reflection on contemporary struggles in the context of climate emergency.

Ecofeminism as a response to apocalyptic times

The rise of the first significant ecofeminist battles cannot be separated from the unique political climate in which they were born, especially in the United States. In the early 1980s, nuclear energy for civilian and military purposes posed a direct threat to living conditions on Earth. The fear of nuclear war not only fuelled cultural productions striking apocalyptic tones, but also led to public policies encouraging populations to prepare for a possible disaster in practical ways. This explains why the period saw the emergence of survivalism, which is the anticipation of a disaster where the government fails to ensure access to essential goods and services for the population.

Ecofeminism can be seen as a “turning point” — if we choose to call “ecofeminist” different battles which are not always defined this way at the grassroots level — for it positions itself as an alternative to catastrophism, which often leads to cynicism and fatalism (Zitouni, 2017). Highlighting the political and organisational innovations of the ecofeminist movement can fuel strategic thinking in a context where climate crisis and the collapse of biodiversity confront us again with a global threat bearing tragic consequences.

Making the scale of disaster palpable

In the face of disasters, the primary strength of ecofeminism is its capacity to make palpable both environmental devastation itself and its impact on the lives of affected populations. Instead of using the technical, civilised lingo of cost-benefit analyses, stories and descriptions emerging from protests seek to capture the suffering and violence reflected in human bodies. In a surge against cold and disembodied scientific expertise, the counter-expertise developed by ecofeminist activists — especially learning how to decipher technical and scientific reports — keeps room for people’s experience. Opposing compensatory logic, they insist on the impossibility to measure the resulting damage in the first place. Their endeavour draws on the invention of a new body language to give substance to the disaster. Ecofeminists break with the idea that knowledge should be neutral and keep any affective dimension at bay, con-

versely defending that emotionally rooted knowledge and cases do matter. The members of the Women and Life on Earth group declared during the first ecofeminist meeting in Amherst in 1980: *We, Women, are the fact and the flesh of connectedness.*

This emphasis, however, is not conveyed only through community-rooted narratives but also through political action, with protests staged most theatrically, for example during the commemoration of the nuclear accident at Three Mile Island, for which the parade took the form of a performance in several acts; or during November 1980's Pentagon Action, when thousands of women marched towards the Pentagon, carrying tombstones symbolising victims of oppression, followed by a massive procession of giant puppets representing mourning, rage, emancipation, and dare. For Benedikte Zitouni (2014), the renewal process carried out by the ecofeminist movement implies the discovery of the power that comes from occupying the places where the disaster started and unfolded, and from the use of artefacts that push people beyond their limits, increasing their body's capacity to resist while making the consequences of environmental devastation visible.

II – PROTEST AS A TRANSFORMATIVE MOMENT

Celebrating life here and now

While many ecofeminist battles grew out of the experience of degraded living environments and the fear of a global catastrophe, the movement demonstrated innovative and creative power essentially in the way it responded. Far from falling into resignation or downplaying their protests, ecofeminist actions not only highlight all the suffering, but they also contribute first and foremost to the celebration of life here and now. Ecofeminist activist Starhawk speaks of "dreaming the dark" (2003) in order not to be "devoured" by it. In summary, ecofeminism is an endeavour to do politics differently while demonstrating joy and attachment to territories threatened in multiple ways.

The transformative power of these actions and occupations has been articulated by numerous grassroots accounts. By giving room to emotions, anger, sadness, but also to joy in the first place, both the fight itself and its goals offer participants an opportunity to experience, incarnate, and ex-

plore emotions. Ecofeminist demonstrations, for example the occupation of the Greenham Common military base in England from 1981 to 2000, go beyond simple protests, providing a laboratory where one can experiment with alternative ways of living and fighting. Female participants have narrated the novelty of an experience powered by sorority and single-gendered events, when, freed from the male gaze and its associated constraints, they could feel the joy not only of being together, but also of cheering traits that are usually associated with womanhood and devalued, and of healing. The ecofeminist movement promotes experiential politics. The goal is to celebrate an alternative way of being in the world, create the conditions for it, build connections to nature and take care of it.

Reclaiming HERstory

The ecofeminist movement makes yet another significant contribution by proclaiming the importance of embracing a dense historical background. Far from being disconnected from the world, ecofeminists, in addition, seek to build on the legacy of past lives to draw inspiration from them and make them continue to exist. For that purpose, they produce narratives through which it becomes possible to re-evaluate and highlight stories that had been pushed aside or even removed from dominant narratives. In the face of HIStory, ecofeminists proclaim HERstory, re-examining history as we know it from the start. Works by ecofeminist philosophers and historians, for example by Carolyn Merchant (1980), help spread these pioneering narratives. Ecofeminists also take over specific historical moments where the domination of nature and the domination of women intersect. For example, after academic works disclosed how witch hunts — mainly against midwives — aimed to exert control over reproduction (Federici, 1998), ecofeminists rehabilitated the stigmatised witch figure and turned the stigma into a symbol of their struggle by calling themselves "witches".

Therefore, ecofeminism's primary act is one of *reclaiming*. Emilie Hache (2016: 23) explains that the term "*means rehabilitating and reappropriating something that has been destroyed or devalued, as well as altering it while being altered by the reclaiming process in return. This is, again, no step backwards, but rather repair, regeneration, and invention, here and now.*" It is about reconnecting and reclaiming what has been separated by the capitalist system in its en-



„Neither women nor land are territories for conquest!”
© Eléonor Gilbert



“We are the granddaughters of the witches you failed to burn!”
© Gustave Deghilage via flickr

deavour to pacify and cancel critical voices. In reconnecting “spirituality and emancipation; the genesis of capitalism and mass graves; feminism and womanhood; pragmatism and rituals; seriousness and joie de vivre; nature/earth and the sacred” (Hache, 2018: 121-122), ecofeminists reactivate and revalue these associations while questioning them.

Ecofeminist struggles and legacies

Yet, the reception of the ecofeminist movement in Europe remains scarce. Apart from England with the Greenham Common camp, few large European organisations claim they are ecofeminist. However, there seems to have been a rediscovery of ecofeminism and its theoretical and practical impact in the last years. One milestone illustration of this is the ecofeminist large-scale action against the mining project at the “Zone à Défendre de la Colline” (Hill “Zone to Defend”, abbreviated ZAD in French) in Switzerland on 28 March 2021. The ecofeminist group¹ that initiated the action gave the following account and explanation in a statement:

“On this Sunday, 28 March, we reclaimed the mine and our bodies, in one unique and symbolic gesture on the hill. To

the sound of drums, naked or half-naked, we made our way to the edge of the mine, to the edge of the debris of Holcim. With our freed, made-up bodies launched into the rock gardens, we symbolically freed the hill from mining by removing the barriers of Holcim with our cutting pliers. This hill is not yours! we shouted. A banner “Free our bodies and the Earth from patriarchal concrete and its world”, and other items have been hung to the metal structure that marks the boundaries between the untapped natural space defended by Zadists [activists occupying a “Zone to Defend”] and the quarry. Our action is a liberating scream and a breach in the private ownership of land and lives. We don’t want Holcim: free the hill from the grip of this ecocidal multinational!”

Within the protests for climate action that emerged after the failure of the Paris agreement, but also, in parallel, during feminist actions, protesters came up with new slogans which claimed an ecofeminist heritage and made a clear connection between the two struggles.

The legacy and the thought of ecofeminism thus irrigate — even though only tentatively — the contemporary fights against the climate disaster at work and the decried “unnecessary imposed mega projects” (best known by

1 You can read their declaration at: <https://lecolvertdupeuple.ch/2021/03/28/action-ecofeministe-en-soutien-a-la-zad-de-la-colline/>

their French acronym GPII, for “grands projets inutiles et imposés”), contributing to a convergence among struggles. However, ecofeminism’s recent popularity leads to a dubious appropriation of its central themes by capitalism (Berrard, 2021). Markets reengineer the ecofeminist culture and its spiritual and essentialising rhetoric, undermining its political and critical power. Many nascent places, especially magazines, try to turn ecofeminism into a new slogan for neoliberal personal development. The witch figure itself is reused and depoliticised. The stated objective is to “awaken the witch in us” and uncritically reconnect with the sacred feminine. Although one might acknowledge that spiritual interpretations of ecofeminism can offer a heuristic dimension, it appears that only the materialist, anti-capitalist critique developed by a few ecofeminist fringes cannot be appropriated by capitalism.

Lastly, reclaiming nature, a characteristic often associated with the movement, makes it possible for the extreme right to appropriate ecofeminism as well. In the eighth issue of the French catholic review for integral ecology *Limite*, Eugénie Bastié and Marianne Durano (2017) claim an ecofeminist heritage: “Our feminism is an ecofeminism”, they write. Here, the praise of women’s nature can lead to supporting anti-abortion positions and promoting the heteronomous model of the nuclear family.

Today, we must acknowledge the power of ecofeminism, its context-aware, experiential critique, and its innovative ways of doing politics in times of disasters: they invite us to rethink contemporary struggles from a novel perspective. However, we must stay vigilant, for capitalism reclaims and stifles its critical power (Boltanski & Chiapello, 1999) and, in addition, ecofeminist conservatives advertise biased interpretations by essentialising female attributes to preserve patriarchal patterns.

III – THE CONTROVERSIES IN THE ECOFEMINIST MOVEMENT

Far from being a school of thought ideologically well established, ecofeminism should instead be defined through the many practices and struggles it encompasses, which all

seek to address feminist and environmental issues jointly. This heterogeneity of activist forms impacts the way theoretical matters are approached. The multiple possible connections between feminist and ecological issues have made it possible for various traditions of thought to claim an ecofeminist perspective. Ecofeminism hence appears as a hybrid object at the confluence of numerous debates, which we must analyse if we want to avoid caricature of the movement, for example by essentialising women or by seeing ecofeminism as a form of irrationalist neopaganism². To avoid these traps, we will start by examining two criticisms, or misunderstandings, commonly heard about the ecofeminist movement, and attempt to reconstruct the debates around them. The first criticism is that ecofeminism essentialises women into “natural” or “biological” roles, prompting a backlash against feminist achievements. We will see why this reading is wrong. A second criticism is that esoteric tendencies in ecofeminism might fuel rejection of rationalism in all its forms. By addressing these criticisms, we want to highlight not only the diversity of ecofeminist contributions, but also the fault lines to be found within this protean movement.

An essentialist worldview?

The recent popularity of ecofeminism in academic fields, activist circles and the media testifies how much the signifier “nature” has regained prominence within critical thought (Genel, Vuillerod and Wezel 2020). Ecofeminism itself partially breaks with the history of the feminist movement, which has long consisted in refusing to assign women to a “natural” condition. Ecofeminism also apparently opposes recent “deconstructivist” perspectives, which, in line with Judith Butler, go so far as to reject the biological reality of sex. Instead of participating in the strenuous work of deconstructing gender assignments and “de-naturalising” women, ecofeminism, by contrast, seems to fuel a backlash against the feminist movement and prolong the domination of women, or even appears as reactionary rhetoric.

Admittedly, ecofeminism sometimes refers to nature ambiguously. On the one hand, the positive association of feminism with environmental struggles takes on an almost

2 Féminisme et écologie : un lien naturel ?, Janet Biehl, *Le Monde Diplomatique*, Mai 2011, <https://www.monde-diplomatique.fr/2011/05/BIEHL/20467>

biological dimension. On the other hand, this association is presented as strategic and non-essentialist. German ecofeminist Maria Mies is emblematic of this paradox. In her famous work *Patriarchy and Accumulation on a World Scale*, she seeks to unveil the “social origins” of the sexual division of labour by describing the historical and political dynamics that led to the male appropriation of women’s work as well as of natural resources (Mies 2014, p44). Through her research, Mies says that she intended to discard biological theories accounting for differences between men and women in the allocation of productive and reproductive work. However, in parallel to her historical and material approach, she suggests that biological properties might account for how men and women respectively build a relationship with nature:

“In the course of their history, women observed the changes in their own bodies and acquired through observation and experiment a vast body of experiential knowledge about the functions of their bodies, about the rhythms of menstruation, about pregnancy and childbirth. This appropriation of their own bodily nature was closely related to the acquisition of knowledge about the generative forces of external nature, about plants, animals, the earth, water and air”. (Mies 2014, p54).

In this passage, Mies unambiguously connects women’s relationship to nature and female biology, in particular female reproductive capacities. According to her, women’s experience of their own fertility makes them more prone to engaging in an empathetic relationship with nature. By contrast, she says, male physiology induces a radically different relationship with nature. While women experience their bodies as productive beings, men can become productive only through external objects and tools. To Mies, this biological difference gives rise to a process of subjectivation and attachment to nature that is different and characterised by a relation of domination:

“In the course of history, men’s reflection of their object-relation to external nature found expression in the symbols with which they described their own body-organs. It is interesting that the first male organ which gained prominence as the symbol of male productivity was the phallus, not the hand, though the hand was the main instrument for tool-making [...] these analogies of penis and plough, seed and semen, field and women are not only linguistic expressions of an in-

strumental object-relation of men to nature and women, they also indicate that this object-relation is already characterized by dominance”. (Mies 2014, p57).

Although initially engaged in a process to unveil the *social* origins of the division of labour, Mies apparently re-naturalises the latter, which is questionable from an emancipatory feminist perspective (Nouët 2020). However, while some ecofeminist authors demonstrate essentialist tendencies in their way to relate women to nature, ecofeminism remains primarily a theoretical device to deconstruct the mechanisms prompting such connexion. In *The Death of Nature*, Carolyn Merchant constructs a political history of science by showing the dual dominance over nature and women that emerged in the early modern period. To her, modern science is characterised by a mechanistic, inanimate view of nature, in which it is possible to master nature rationally. This modern worldview breaks with the organic view that had prevailed in medieval cosmologies. For Merchant, the change in the perception of nature exceeds a mere shift in representations and comes embedded in *political* history, with repression against women surging in that period. Indeed, the modern scientific revolution was inseparable from a vaster political project aiming to restore order in a highly turbulent feudal society. Merchant emphasises the role of witch hunts in this emergence of the modern political and scientific rationality. Witches were perceived as a threat in several ways. First, they held deeply anti-hierarchical views in society and gathered in sects where they championed equality among members. They also had animistic beliefs about nature. Therefore, the emergence of modern science and its accompanying worldview entailed that women had to be tamed politically:

« The disorder symbolized in the macrocosm by the dissolution of the frame of nature and the uncivilized wilderness of the new world, in society by the witch who controlled the forces of nature and the women who overturned its order [...] the sexual lust of the female, and the animal passions of all humans heralded the death of the old order of nature. From the stirred ashes a new order was emerging, which would reconstruct the self, society, and the cosmos. The passivity of the female in the sphere of reproduction would be reasserted, sexual passion would eventually be repressed and the spirits would be removed from nature in coincidence with the waning of witch trials; female roles would increasingly be defined in terms of domestic functions » (Merchant 1980, p148).

Merchant seeks to narrate the emergence of the modern scientific paradigm within the social, political, and historical context of a hierarchical society in the making, with, among other things, the assignment of women to “passive” reproductive tasks to that end. Modern scientific rationality is inseparable from the political rationality that concurrently emerged.

As a whole, ecofeminism values the link between women and nature, whether in an essentialist or constructivist way. However, the essentialist view may rightly appear as a step backwards from the legacy of feminist critique, which challenges the naturalisation of female domination in the first place. Ecofeminism is thus caught in a dilemma. On the one hand, it intends to draw on the specific experience of women and establish a relationship of non-domination towards nature. On the other hand, by doing so, it finds itself at risk of replicating an approach to womanhood that has long contributed to the domination of women, thus breaking with feminist tradition.

In *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature*, Australian philosopher Val Plumwood suggests a middle ground to overcome this theoretical impasse. Responsibility for the environmental crisis, she says, lies with a modern form of the reason she calls “rationality of the master”, which corresponds to a male view of reason. One of its central mechanisms is the backgrounding of reproductive issues as well as of the issue of dependence on nature and female work. The identity of the master emerges from producing a series of dualisms, the most notable ones being in our context the oppositions between freedom and necessity, and between production and reproduction. According to Plumwood, these dualisms intersect with two structural dualisms reflecting the oppositions between humanity and nature, and between men and women. There is thus a homology between women, nature, reproduction issues and the sphere of necessity on the one hand, and men, culture, production issues and the sphere of freedom on the other. Therefore, a break with the logic of the master must build on values associated with individuals that have been “subalternised” by this logic. Plumwood identifies here two pitfalls that a feminist, environment-friendly perspective should be aware of. One would be to pick up the identity as defined by the master without challenging it (the Cavern of reversal), the other would be to completely dissolve gender identities despite the fact that these social identi-

ties can also be a place for positive affirmations. Plumwood then advocates for the “critical affirmation” of womanhood, breaking with the image of helplessness that is commonly attributed to it. Some “female” values could offer resources for dealing with the ecological crisis. Women could thus play a decisive role in establishing an “ethics of partnership” (Merchant 2003) with the introduction of a relationship to nature that is qualitatively different.

The link between ecofeminism and essentialism is, therefore, more complex than some of its critics seem to suggest. Ecofeminism is not so much the essentialisation of women, but a movement entangled in two conflicting dynamics: a willingness to reckon on female characteristics to solve the environmental crisis, and the imperative to reflect through a critical and constructivist lens on how these characteristics were produced in the first place. The ecofeminist quest to resolve this apparent contradiction can be likened to a form of “strategic naturalism” (Guillibert, 2020). This notion, based on Spivak’s model of “strategic essentialism”, emphasises the *political* importance of the reflection led by ecofeminists on how to overcome the domination over nature as well as define the political subject capable of fighting that battle — while studiously avoiding to essentialise the relationship between women and nature.

Rejection of materialism?

In addition to essentialism, the other frequent major criticism against ecofeminism pertains to its spiritual tendencies. Although ecofeminism displays such tendencies, there is nevertheless much nuance to them. The spiritual aspects of ecofeminism are far from being consensual within the movement. Radcliffe (2000) notes that there are two opposing currents in ecofeminism, a more materialist and a more spiritual one. To her, this opposition rises along the fault line between, on one side, ecofeminisms from Southern countries and the United States, and, on the other, ecofeminisms originating in Europe. In the United States, ecofeminism tends to strike spiritual tones, for example when debating Native American and Aboriginal cultures. The ecofeminist American mass mobilisations evoked in the first part contained neopagan allusions. By contrast, European ecofeminism stays closer to more materialist thinkers.

The divide between spiritualism and materialism largely overlaps that between constructivism and essentialism. The more spiritual tendencies will most likely pursue an essentialising approach to the relationship between nature and womanhood. By contrast, more materialist approaches tend to challenge this link. Mary Mellor insists that reproductive work, while necessary to any society, is far from being *essentially* linked to women:

“This is not to return to an essentialist idealization of women as mothers. Not all women are mothers or want to be mothers. Not all mothers enjoy that role. Moreover, mothering is a role that can be carried out by men. The potentially positive values of mothering attach to the performance of the task, not to the biology of the performer” (Mellor 1996, p 258).

Ecofeminism does not meet the esoteric *new wage* imagery sometimes associated with it, but instead provides fertile ground for cross-examining Marxist and materialist thinking. Researchers like Mary Mellor, Ariel Salleh (1997), Sylvia Federici (2004), and Stefania Barca (2020) seek to draw on contributions by materialist feminists to cast a new light on environmental issues, showing just how poorly reproductive work has been addressed by socialist thinkers, and underlining the ecological implications of such obliteration. To them, the gendered distribution of social work tends to assign women to tasks that are necessary to the reproduction of society without them being acknowledged by markets. In their view, the capitalist system relies on a series of non-market activities carried out mainly by women. For these materialist ecofeminist thinkers, such forms of work offer “normative grammars” (Fraser 2017) capable of challenging the hegemony of production and the subsequent domination of nature. This materialist ecofeminist vision draws on the possibility of a new political subject able to bring about the (re)productive transformation of our societies, and it speculates in addition to its transposition in politics.

IV - POLITICAL EXPRESSIONS

In its strictest materialist version, ecofeminism insists on the necessity to account for the political value of reproductive work, which it sees as instrumental to the ecological transformation of our societies. It identifies objective possibilities for social transformation and articulates them with

a reflection on which political subjectivities can implement such ambition, focusing on the experience of reproductive work as carried out today mainly by women, as well as on the bonds to nature that possibly result from it. From a theoretical perspective, ecofeminism, in so doing, follows a long critical tradition aiming to reflect jointly on the objective and subjective possibilities of social transformation. In addition, the possible concrete expressions of ecofeminism are put under scrutiny with a political lens, beyond the sole minoritarian practices mentioned in our first part.

The influence of ecofeminism on social struggles

As we have shown in the first part, ecofeminist struggles consisted at first in the occupation of military installations. This repertoire of action, akin to that of the new social movements, has sometimes appeared as exceedingly far-off to workers engaging in more traditional labour struggles. The environmentalist dimension of these struggles has also hindered the convergence between ecofeminist issues and the topics championed by trade unions and workers’ organisations, against the backdrop of long-existing reciprocal blindness between those different forms of fights. Nevertheless, the ecofeminist perspective is able to engage with traditional workers’ struggles and foster convergences between social and environmental struggles.

Progressive social forces, which get challenged by the necessity to include environmental issues, are offered an opportunity to establish a connection between social and ecological struggles by adopting an ecofeminist perspective. This reconciliation is indeed possible, as Barca and Leonardi suggest following their field investigation in the city of Taranto in southern Italy. The city is home to one of the oldest steelworks in Europe, accounting for more than three-quarters of the city’s GDP. The steelworks had been built in the 1960s to supply factories in northern Italy with steel, as part of an Italian governmental policy aiming at industrialising southern Italy to ensure raw material supplies for the entire national industry. This strategy was based on perceptions of the people in the Italian south as being “backwards” and highly suitable as cheap, docile workers. This view turned out to be accurate: The city cheered the new factory and saw it as an opportunity to raise the standard of living for the people in this region that was poorly integrated into the productive Italian fabric. The workers, who were overwhelmingly male, yet quickly realised

the rampant damage that factory work inflicted on their health. But, because of a patriarchal culture valuing the figure of the “breadwinner” and the integration of the unions into the management of the factory — with sharing of the company’s income with workers, which led to a steady rise in their standard of living — environmental degradation did not turn into a cause of conflict for a long period: *“The normalization of this model of economic dependency and environmental sacrifice, which condemned Taranto to the job blackmail, may be explained as a result of an internal colonization process, by which people of Taranto had internalized their subalternity by representing themselves as “backward people”, and thus welcomed the opportunity of accessing modernity through State-led industrialization”*. Taranto thus became an ecologically “sacrificed zone” for decades. With the destruction of earlier economic activities (agriculture, fishing), the city shifted to an “industrial monoculture” model. In the early 2000s, however, the productivist consensus started to crack. While it became increasingly clear that environmental damage was not confined to the sole factory space but, in addition, affected the health of all the local residents, a protest committee composed mainly of women (*Donne per Taranto*) sought to question the ecological impact of the factory. The highlighting of the health damage caused by production activities challenged the “male narrative” based on the figure of the “breadwinner” who ensures his family’s survival in exchange for his health. However, at first, the conflict took the shape of a struggle between the forces of production and of reproduction. The factory unions, supported by most workers, protested against community collectives going to court to enforce environmental standards. Yet, fault lines eventually shifted, to the point of swaying workers massively to the side of activists from the reproductive sphere. A committee made up of workers and “ordinary citizens” was created, breaking with the usual primacy of production over reproduction which used to characterise the unions’ position. The creation paved the way to “social unionism”, with the aim to reconfigure *“the link between politics and economy by stressing their reciprocal internality as different but interdependent instances of commoning”*. The committee demanded employment be guaranteed by the State and a plan be established to convert the site into new activities. Alongside the committee, at the frontier between the productive and reproductive spheres, rank and file unionists exerted pressure within the factory, bringing the environmental struggle into the workplace.

Through the example of Taranto, Barca and Leonardi illustrate how an ecofeminist perspective can fruitfully help overcome the contradiction between social and environmental issues. By questioning the traditional division between the productive and reproductive spheres, the ecofeminist fight led by the women of Taranto has enabled a reconfiguration of alliances at the local level, ultimately leading to a reflection on how policies can jointly ensure economic and ecological security for the city. Barca and Leonardi go even further and believe that this struggle can serve as a symbol of the possibility of an *ecological class consciousness* resulting from the contradicting positions adopted by the working class on the processes of production and reproduction: *“ecological class consciousness is what may allow working-class people to recognize the ecological contradictions that affect their communities, and to act upon them in specific ways”*. In this perspective, the working class does not limit itself to the productive sphere but also addresses the reproductive one, and it does not take a stand *against* former class positions but rather positions itself as *expanding* them. This is, in our opinion, the chief contribution made by Barca and Leonardi with their research. By positioning itself at the intersection of the productive and reproductive spheres, working-class environmentalism offers an opportunity to overcome oppositions between the two dimensions dialectically. The researchers adopted a Thompsonian-like approach and documented the conditions for an environment-aware class to emerge from the contradiction between, on the one hand, the internal experience of conflicting positions on the re/production relations and, on the other hand, the experience of transformative praxis to re-embed the economy within social issues and the environment.

A new narrative for the left?

In addition to possible alliances between ecofeminist movements and union struggles, ecofeminism represents the opportunity for the left to renew its narrative and match it with social and environmental issues. According to Barca (2019), most leftist organisations tend to defend an eco-modernist vision of environmentalism and consider the ecological question a technical issue instead of questioning levels of production and existing productive forms. By doing so, the left is at risk of being in line with what Barca calls the “Anthropocene narrative” (2020). This narrative defends an apolitical view of the Anthropocene

by treating humanity as a homogeneous stakeholder when addressing liability issues in the current ecological crisis. It develops a technical view of the Anthropocene, proposing “pragmatic” solutions without challenging the foundations of political and economic systems. According to Barca, such rhetoric negates the responsibility of the various systems of oppression (patriarchal, capitalist and neo-colonial) for the environmental crisis.

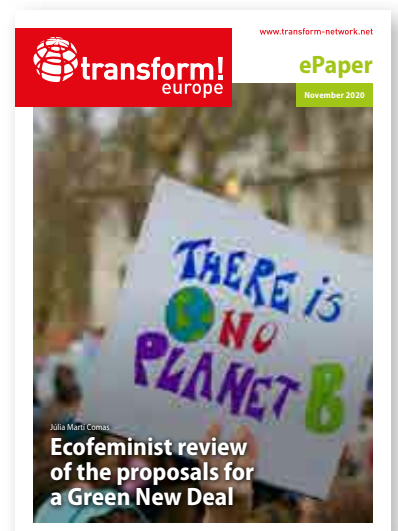
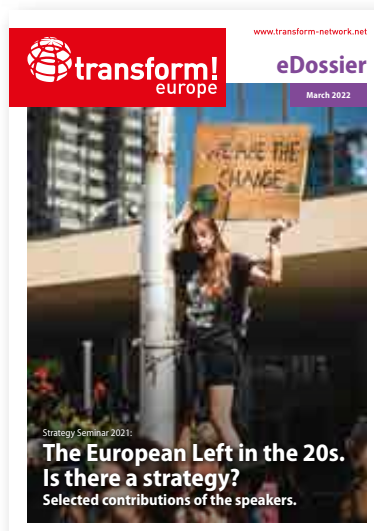
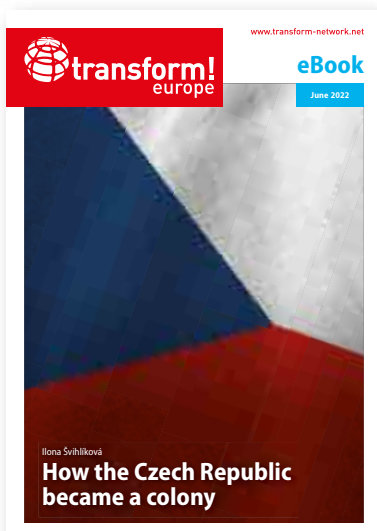
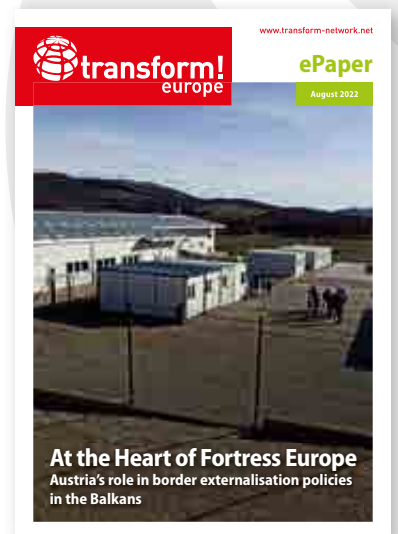
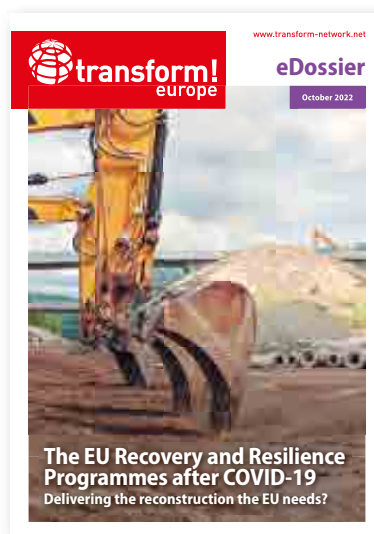
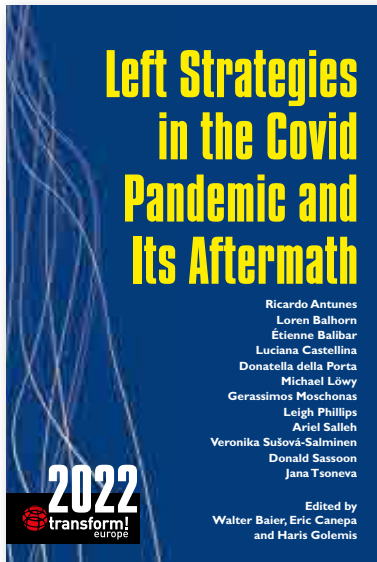
Ecofeminism offers an opportunity to re-politicise the Anthropocene narrative by analysing it as the result of a set of dominations that culminate in the contemporary environmental crisis. By conceptualising the domination of women and nature jointly, ecofeminism claims it can reflect on systems of domination and on how they intersect, as well as show how the capitalist system supports and feeds patriarchal domination processes. In that perspective, to undo the dominant Anthropocene narrative, four types of relationships contributing to the current ecological situation are to be taken into account (Barca 2020, p24): colonial (denial of the rights of non-Western peoples), gender (only forces of production), class (exploitation is legitimate) and interspecific (non-humans do not count). In her approach, Barca is in line with Plumwood, who seeks to eliminate the denial and backgrounding of reproductive relationships. The ecofeminist contribution thus consists in redefining the new narrative, with forces of reproduction becoming the new incarnation of the revolutionary political subject seeking to re-embed the economy within planetary limits as well as to put an end to the unlimited exploitation of nature.

Ecofeminism can hence contribute more broadly to renewing the political narrative and radical left practices. Today, the radical left faced with double challenge when trying to identify the political subjectivities capable of implementing their project of social transformation. On the one hand, the working class as a unified political subject supporting left forces has disappeared. On the other hand, this political subject does not traditionally address social *and* environmental issues (Latour 2017). In that perspective, ecofeminism can help rethink new class alliances as part of a project of social and ecological transformation.

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