



Letters

Gendered Rationality

In her review of my book *Rethinking Eco-feminist Politics* (*The Ecologist*, Vol. 22, No. 1, Jan/Feb 1992), ecofeminist Val Plumwood asserts that my portrayal of ecofeminism as "apolitical, anti-rational . . . and involving a total repudiation of the intellectual and political traditions of the West" is a "stereotype". But Plumwood's own article, "Feminism and Ecofeminism", in the same issue of *The Ecologist*, provides little reason to doubt the accuracy of my description.

How is it possible to avoid concluding that ecofeminism is anti-rational when Plumwood argues that "the Western concept of reason", which is "masculine," "has provided one of the main intellectual bases for the domination of women in Western culture"? Plumwood objects to a strategy in which women are to "join men in participation in . . . rationality". She routinely denounces Western philosophy for its "exclusive focus on the universal and the abstract", which she sees as not only "masculine" but part and parcel of that culture's "oppression" of women and nature. Despite the danger of perpetuating patriarchal stereotypes of women, Plumwood thinks feminists need the "woman-nature connection" as preserved by ecofeminism in order to understand this "masculinity of culture".

If feminists do follow her in believing that Western philosophy has been "exclusively" abstract and universal, they will simply be ill-informed. Plato was painfully aware of the difficulties in the universals he proposed, while medieval Christian theology revered "the Book of Nature" as second only to scripture as a source of knowledge of "God". Empiricists like Locke, sceptics like Hume, and pragmatists like Dewey — all were critics of

universalistic abstraction. Still, it remains unclear whether coherent human experience is even conceivable without generalizations of some kind — such as the ones with which Plumwood so extravagantly denounces Western rationality. Nor does she seem to have noticed my discussion of social ecology's dialectical reason, a form of rationality that constitutes an organic alternative to instrumental reason.

Plumwood's ignorance does not prevent her from trying to correct me: "Plato did not take the soul of the world to be female", she intones against me. Actually, Plato *did* regard the "world-soul" as female, in *Timaeus* (37a), as ecofeminist Carolyn Merchant noted rather prominently in *The Death of Nature*. Plumwood would do well to familiarize herself with the basic literature in her field before she accuses others of being "poorly informed"!

And is it really stereotyping, as Plumwood alleges, to regard ecofeminism as depoliticizing, even apolitical? She herself, in her *Ecologist* article, advances a series of psychologistic platitudes about reconstructing masculinity and femininity with which few thinking people today, despite their handicap of not being ecofeminists, would disagree. But separated from a public political context (which she denounces as "masculine"), such privatistic formulations allow the political and social to be reduced to the psychological and personal, as exemplified by feminist-turned-New Ager Gloria Steinem's recent assertion: "it's time to turn the feminist adage around . . . *the political is the personal*."

I argue for social ecology's *concrete* political approach — libertarian municipalism, a form of confederated direct democracy to countervail statism. (Plumwood, missing the confederalism, dismisses this as "local control.") A decentralized public sphere would make possible a direct democracy that is much more accessible to those involved in domestic concerns. Plumwood's own political approach, whatever it may be, apparently does not involve democracy, direct or otherwise. For her, the historical sins of the democratic tradition — especially the Athenian polis's exclusion of women, slaves, and resident aliens from citizenship — are apparently irremediable. Outrageously and manipulatively, she insists that I "refuse to acknowledge" these exclusions. Not only do I so, I leave no doubt that they can and must be remedied — a necessity that Plumwood trivializes. I regard these

very real exclusions as historical, not "central" to the democratic tradition as such — unlike Plumwood. The potentiality of the democratic tradition that the Greeks initiated is much in need of fulfillment — not rejection.

The need to "reconceptualize masculine and feminine" is surely compelling as well, but doing so in the name of feminism creates another problem of exclusion: men. Plumwood rejects "humanism" as excluding women, but humanism as a concept is hardly exhausted by the rigid masculine or anti-ecological constructs by which she defines it. Eternalizing an opposition between feminism and humanism viciously locates women outside humanism altogether. In all its history, humanism has been in the process of transformation. An ecological humanism that encompassed gender "reconceptualizations" and women's liberation would be consistent with the development of that tradition, and immensely desirable.

Plumwood's primary contribution to ecofeminism, however elegantly couched in the fashionable jargon of academia, is to exaggerate an already simplistic critique of Western dualism into terms more rigid and nightmarish than even the historical record warrants. Such caricatures do considerable harm to feminist and ecological thought and politics in the real world.

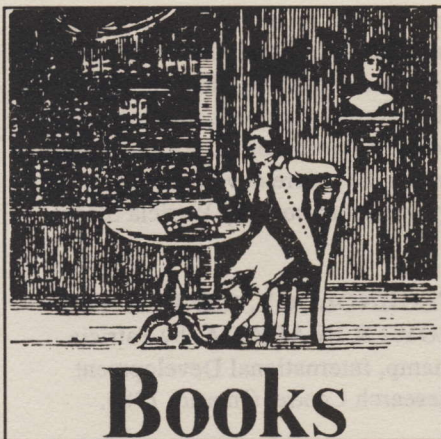
Janet Biehl

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Val Plumwood replies . . .

Janet Biehl's response to my review repeats and even intensifies many of the approaches I found most problematic in her book, especially stereotyping and misrepresentation, failure to take account of important theoretical developments especially in feminism, and political conservatism.

Ecofeminists whose views don't match Biehl's anti-rational stereotype (and there are few who do) find them cut and trimmed to fit. Biehl demonstrates for all to see her well-practised techniques of misrepresentation by omitting crucial qualifications in presenting and quoting from my work. I (and the many other feminists who make similar kinds of criticisms) have never rejected rationality outright or in all forms. The oppositional and dualistic conception



The Atavism of Flighty Females

RETHINKING ECOFEMINIST POLITICS, by Janet Biehl, Southend Press, Boston, 1991, \$10 (pb), 181pp. ISBN 0-89608-391-8.

As the first book-length critical discussion of the ideas of ecofeminism written from a non-ecofeminist perspective, Janet Biehl's book could have been extremely useful. Unfortunately, although *Rethinking Ecofeminist Politics* makes some good points, it is poorly informed, not only about ecofeminism itself but also about contemporary currents of thought in philosophy and social and political theory. It is concerned less with a fair discussion of ecofeminist ideas than with promoting "social ecology" by rubbishing supposed rival positions.

Biehl fails to recognize the diversity of ecofeminist thinking and instead focuses exclusively on forms of ecofeminism close to cultural feminism. Biehl's "survey" of ecofeminism in her first chapter makes sweeping claims condemning all attempts to link feminism and ecology. This is done on the basis of a consideration of a few authors who can be approximated to her stereotype of ecofeminism as apolitical, anti-rational, home and nature-worshipping, and involving a total repudiation of the intellectual and political traditions of the West. The book therefore fails to engage with the most significant themes of ecofeminism concerning the origins, interconnection and common structure of the oppression of women and of nature and of other forms of oppression, and the rejection of the nature/culture

dualism. Biehl focuses instead on issues such as feminist paganism which are not central to ecofeminism, to which many ecofeminists have no commitment, and which some (such as Rosemary Radford Ruether) have already cogently criticized.

The reason for Biehl's selectiveness appears to be that proper recognition of the range of ideas and options clustered under the label "ecofeminism" would show convergence with social ecology and thus conflict with the book's factionalist political agenda. It is not at all clear why social ecology, which links the destruction of nature to social hierarchy, and ecofeminism should be supposed to be incompatible (although particular forms of them might be). At least one leading ecofeminist, the peace and ecology activist Ynestra King — who is singled out for some of the most outrageous misrepresentation in the book — also calls herself a social ecologist.

It is in her defence of the Western tradition against the forces of the irrational, supposedly represented by flighty ecofeminist females, that Biehl's book is at its weakest. Critics of Western beliefs and institutions are cast either as "atavistic" or as potential Nazis. Biehl wrongly attributes to ecofeminism the complete repudiation of the public sphere and of science and rationality, a view which would indeed make ecofeminism unsatisfactory. Biehl ignores the extensive critique of reason advanced by feminist philosophers, which shows that Western liberal institutions are not gender-neutral in the way Biehl claims.

Biehl sees all cultural value in terms of the public sphere, and places full responsibility for change on the private, which, we are told, women need to "break out of". Many ecofeminists, like many feminists, would argue that men also need to break out of the public sphere and its false universalism and would advocate a political strategy which involves breaking down the public/private dualism.

Equality Among the Directors

Like most liberals who see both present and past exclusions as incidental, Biehl idealizes the Greeks as originators of a universal, participatory, democratic tradition based on reason. This is a mythology liberally sprinkled with "regrettable exceptions" to inclusion: the slaves, women, and "barbarians" who made up

70 per cent of the internal population of the *polis*; plus everyone and everything else external to it. The classical *polis* was a corporation with equality only among the directors. Exclusion is central, not incidental, to the political traditions of the public sphere. Biehl's extensive and adulatory historical treatment of classical Greece contains a number of doubtful claims and outright errors. Except for one or two lonely and censored voices, classical Greece did not attribute rationality to humans generally, an insight which would have threatened the institution of slavery. Plato did not take the soul of the world to be female; in fact, he presents in the *Timaeus* a set of metaphors in which matter (chaos) plays the inferior female role ("nurse" or "receptacle") to the maleness of cosmos, representing rational order.

The solution for the world's problems as Biehl ultimately presents it — small-scale participatory democracy (grandly renamed as "libertarian municipalism") as an antidote to abstract "hierarchy" — looks very like liberalism writ small. Biehl has nothing to say to the problems of exclusion and marginalization, which, as she admits, plagued most small-scale civic formations of the past, except that we will have to make sure that it does not happen next time. But the refusal to acknowledge the hidden exclusions (of women and others) in the construction of the public sphere and the inadequacy of abstract equality ensures that it *will* happen next time.

A move towards greater local control is important as a partial strategy, but as a panacea, it is as simplistic as the reductionist versions of ecofeminism Biehl rightly rejects. Social ecology in Biehl's version of radicalism remains caught in the old credo of a single ground of hierarchy and a single solution to domination, a reduction which is fundamentally misconceived, insensitive to difference, and blind to exclusion. It is a different conception of radical politics, as an activity which addresses and connects specific and multiple structures of oppression, which informs the approach of many ecofeminists and which holds the promise for the future.

Val Plumwood

Val Plumwood teaches environmental philosophy and feminist theory and has been active in both the environmental and feminist movements for many years.