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Macgregor, Sherilyn

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Earthcare or Feminist Ecological Citizenship?

SHERILYN MACGREGOR

Over the past four decades, feminist environmentalism or “ecofeminism” has been concerned with such difficult questions as: Are women more “naturally” connected to nature than men? Do women’s gendered roles and experiences give them unique insight into human-nature relationships? Why is it that women around the world seem to demonstrate relatively more concern for the quality of their environments than men? Where do the roots of this concern lie? These questions, and the answers they provoke, are discussed in more detail in my book in which I critically interrogate ecofeminist discourses that make connections between women’s caring and ecological politics. I question why it is that many ecofeminists assert a special role for women as environmental care-takers without considering their lives as political subjects or what it might mean for women in existing inegalitarian and unsustainable societies to bear such an enormous responsibility.

In this article I outline my position that *feminist ecological citizenship* is a more promising and more radical language for articulating the goals of ecofeminist politics than the language of care. I believe that an over-reliance on the discourses of care, mothering, and subsistence labour is not a good strategic move for ecofeminism. One reason for this is that it does not take into account the cultural baggage of the ethics of care discourse that claims to be rooted in a feminized and different moral voice. In agreement with feminist moral philosophers (e.g., Tronto 1993), I argue that, in the context of a white male-dominated society that constructs and enforces women’s capacity to care, ecofeminism should not romanticize but *politicize* this capacity. Ecofeminist arguments that celebrate women’s caring for people and the planet without condemning its implication in oppressive political economic systems risk affirming sexist notions about women’s place in society. I think they are particularly dangerous when unpaid caring work is increasingly exploited to facilitate neoliberal policies of privatisation and by environmentalist strategies for tackling climate change. An ecofeminist approach to citizenship, on the contrary, ought to recognize care as a form of work and a moral orientation that has been feminized and privatized in Western societies and that must be distributed fairly within and between societies if gender equality and sustainability are to be realized.

I make this argument because I want to contribute to moving ecofeminism, which I regard as an important intellectual and political movement, in a more promising direction. Ecofeminism is arguably in need of new directions after several decades of internal disagreements over what it stands for, who it speaks to, and what it is called. I am less interested in how it is labeled (i.e., whether it is ecofeminism, feminist environmentalism, feminist political ecology, ecogender studies, or something else) than in the kinds of political debates this movement can inspire. My aim is to create

a space for fruitful and critical consideration of an issue that needs more discussion and debate among ecofeminists and between ecofeminists and other ‘green’ theorists.

Caring for the earth: problems with the ecomaternalist tradition

In 1996, historian and ecofeminist theorist Carolyn Merchant published *Earthcare: Women and the Environment*, a book about women’s efforts to protect the environment and human health throughout history and around the world. From the “moral mothers” of nineteenth century New England, to the “hysterical housewives” at Love Canal in the 1970s, to the *Planeta Fêmea* tent at the 1992 Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro, Merchant celebrates the contributions of women to the struggle for ecological sustainability. In fact, her dedication reads: “To the women who will care for and defend the earth in the third millennium from those who have done so in the recent and deep past” (Merchant 1996: xi). Like many ecofeminist scholars, Merchant places great hope in the myriad material and moral connections that women *qua* women seem to have to nature. When Merchant calls for a “partnership ethic of earthcare”, this hope is translated into an ethical-political prescription for change, founded on women’s “intimate knowledge of nature” (Merchant 1996, 16) that comes out of daily caring practices. The “daily caring practices” part of this assertion is important for many ecofeminists who want to avoid making essentialist claims about women’s biological nature (i.e., that there are essential qualities that all women share by virtue of being female). Aware that charges of essentialism have long undermined ecofeminism, these theorists emphasize that the link they make is a socio-material and experiential one: women’s mothering and care-giving work mediates the relationship between people and nature and thereby engenders a *caring stance* towards nature.

This rhetoric of “ecomaternalism,” as I call it, is pervasive in much of the contemporary ecofeminist discourse. Some of the best-known ecofeminist scholars draw upon a similar connection between women’s caring for people and their environmental concern. For example, Maria Mies and Veronika Bennholdt-Thomsen (1999) write of the “subsistence perspective”; Vandana Shiva (1989) points to the “feminine principle”; Ariel Salleh (1997) celebrates the “barefoot epistemology” of Southern “re/sisters”; and Mary Mellor (2000) calls for a “Women’s Experience (WE) world”. Each of these writers presents a picture of ecofeminism not built on abstract theorizing, but rather on what women do – indeed, *have always done* – to survive the vicissitudes of capitalist-patriarchal-colonial development. Explaining her own version, Mellor argues that “women are not closer to nature because of some elemental physiological or spiritual affinity, but because of the social circumstances in which they find themselves” (2000, 114). Merchant defends her position against the charge of essentialism by claiming it to be gender-inclusive; that is, under the right conditions, men can be earth-carers too. Others contend that, even if they may in some ways be problematic, assertions about a feminine socio-material connection to nature are both inspirational and *strategically useful* for the development of ecofeminism as a political movement (Sturgeon 1997).

Social research provides some empirical evidence to support the claim that women typically demonstrate a higher level of concern for environmental issues relative to men (e.g., Tindall et al. 2003; Hunter et al. 2004). Many feminist scholars make much of the fact that women are often drawn into environmentalism because, as mothers, they fear for their children's health and feel a sense of duty to protect and restore their environments. Joni Seager (1993, 269) argues, for example, that "women's environmental activism occurs within the context of, and as a result of, their particular socially-assigned roles – roles that in many key ways do transcend boundaries of race, ethnicity, and class". Merchant (1996, 13) quotes one activist as saying that "women are 'mothers of the earth' who want to take care of it."

But many such ecofeminist claims about women's "earthcare" are not particularly reliable: they are based on selective readings of a narrow list of empirical examples. For example, the Chipko movement (the most often cited case of women's pro-environmental activism) is inaccurately held up as a women-led conservation movement, whilst women's involvements in pro-development activism are almost never mentioned, nor are examples of "earthcare" where men and women have worked together as equal partners. That women engage in environmental activism at great cost to themselves and often under circumstances that are not of their own choosing is seldom discussed. Because many ecofeminist academics want to downplay the privileged place of Western theory in ecofeminism by listening to voices from the Global South and from the grassroots, the experiences of women activists in environmental struggles are often appropriated and treated as truth. Paradoxically, by invoking experientially and epistemologically based women-nature connections, *even when these are said to be based in material conditions*, many ecofeminists falsely universalize private feminine identities and roles, ignore the complex and shifting contexts in which caring and environmental activism take place, and tread dangerously close to perpetuating racism, sexism, and colonialism. They avoid biological essentialism, but fall into the trap of "sociological essentialism" (Sandilands 1999) or what I would call experiential reductionism.

In response to these problems, I want to ask: what does it mean for a woman to invoke the identity of "mother" to explain her participation in the political sphere? Why see activism as an extension of women's private roles, rather than a conscious choice to engage in public life that is valuable in itself? What are the risks of celebrating women's caring at time when their unpaid, life-sustaining labour is under increased demand from both the neoliberal state and from greens seeking to harness it to solve the serious threats of global climate change?

Caring and citizenship in times of economic crisis

Before moving to my argument for feminist ecological citizenship as an alternative to ecomaternalist discourse, it is important to look at the ways in which caring and citizenship have become increasingly intermingled (perhaps even confused) in the contemporary context. Here we need to recognize what I have called the "dangerous

dovetail” of the neoliberal responsibilisation of citizens,¹ on the one hand, and green prescriptions for sustainable living on the other. Both depend on increased amounts of voluntary, unpaid labour in the private sphere, while being largely oblivious to gender implications. I begin by examining changes to citizenship under neoliberal regimes attempting to manage economic crisis.

It is well known that we are in a prolonged period of neoliberal economic and political restructuring as part of the globalisation of capitalism beginning in the 1990s. As multinational corporations grow less loyal to national economies, national and sub-national governments in the developed world are prompted to implement neoliberal economic policies that attract investment back from more investment-friendly countries of the South. In advanced capitalist countries, this shift has resulted in the dismantling of the welfare state and the gradual privatization of social services, the deregulation of industries, the erosion of environmental and labour standards, the weakening of local governments, and the creation of free-trade agreements. More recently, the global economic downturn has prompted even more drastic cuts to social spending.

While feminist scholars generally accept this explanation of the dominant forces guiding global economic restructuring, they are critical of analyses that focus strictly on changes in the relations and modes of production, retaining the male worker as the main protagonist, and overlooking the realm of social reproduction (including caring and necessary labour) as well as gender divisions altogether. Many feminists have noted that there has been a lack of attention to the deeply gendered aspects of changes in the global economy (Adam 2002). Looking at new economic realities through a feminist lens gives rise to several concerns about changes in the conditions of women’s lives and their role in the organization of caring labour, both within and among nations. These concerns include the dismantling of social welfare and a redefinition of citizenship. Janine Brodie (1996a, b) observes that, with the dismantling of the welfare state, feminists are in the paradoxical position of having to defend a system about which they are ambivalent, because the immediate implications of cut-backs in social spending for women’s lives are severe. Feminist researchers have documented the impacts of cuts to all aspects of social welfare on women as recipients or clients of state-funded services. Perhaps the most notable theme in feminist literature on neoliberal economic restructuring is the analysis that women are expected to act as the “shock absorbers” of privatization (Brodie 1996a, 126) by filling in for lost state-provided services with their own unpaid, caring labour in private households and through volunteer work in communities. Governments often promote the strategy of “community care” as a way to provide better, more personalized care to dependent people at the same time that it saves taxpayers millions of dollars per year. The basic feminist criticism of community care policies is that the state is exploiting and intensifying unpaid caring labour, ostensibly in order to reduce social spending, while at the same time obscuring this reality with the euphemistic language of “community”. It has been established in numerous empirical studies that women

do the vast majority of unpaid caring labour (cf. Bittman/Wajcman 2000; European Commission 2007; Chen et al. 2005). As a result, it is clear that community care policies promise to further entrench the unequal gender division of caring labour and women's subordination in society. Brodie (1996a) calls this the re-privatization of care because of the underlying assumption that it is being returned to its rightful place: in the home and in the hands of mothers, daughters, and wives.

The globalization of capitalism and the progressive erosion of the nation state have also contributed to a redefinition of citizenship. Brodie (1996b, 130) observes that "(i)t has become increasingly apparent that the new neoliberal state marks a distinct shift in shared understandings of what it means to be a citizen and what the citizen can legitimately ask of the state". Her work is part of an important body of feminist public-policy research that seeks to uncover the gender subtext of recent changes in shared understandings of citizenship. Under the Keynesian welfare state, social citizenship entitled people to a basic standard of living, regardless of personal status, because it was recognized that structural forces could constrain opportunities and create economic instability. Further, there was a consensus that the state had a responsibility to safeguard the basic well-being of individuals. Feminists in the West have long supported an approach to citizenship that emphasizes social rights, so that women may participate equally and avoid being burdened with an unfair share of responsibilities. However, with the implementation of a neoliberal agenda, there has been a marked shift away from social citizenship toward a definition of citizenship that is conditional and exclusive. Daniel Drache (1992) writes:

The rights and securities universally guaranteed to citizens of the Keynesian welfare state are no longer rights, universal, or secure. The new ideal of the common good rests on market-oriented values such as self-reliance, efficiency, and competition. The new good citizen is one who recognizes the limits and liabilities of state provision and embraces the obligation to work longer and harder in order to become more self-reliant (quoted in Brodie 1995, 19).

Others have theorised the neoliberal redefinition of citizenship through the lens of governmentality, highlighting the process by which the scope of government is indirectly reduced through the creation of responsible (or responsabilised) citizens who internalise and accept the duty to take care of themselves and their dependents (Rose 1996). If individual citizens do more, then states can spend less: a supposedly cost-effective approach to governing in difficult economic times.

Greening citizenship: more work for women?

One of the biggest pitfalls of a feminism based on women's moral superiority is that it does as much to support a neoliberal as it does an environmentalist vision of social change. It is important to recognize that the neoliberal notion of the responsible citizen coincides dangerously with the green focus on an increased role for citizens and civil society in the search for sustainability. The concept of "environmental citizen-

ship” has become a popular concept throughout the 2000s. The growing awareness of climate change and the belief that human societies are fast approaching the biophysical limits of our inhabitation of the planet have prompted environmental scholars and policy-makers to focus their attention on what it means for citizens to live sustainably (or less unsustainably). Concerns about sustainability have informed proposals for a range of dramatic changes to current systems – economic, regulatory, and political – that would improve the quality of life of current populations while ensuring similar chances for survival of subsequent ones. Because sustainability is a contestable concept and because moving towards a sustainable society will require such dramatic and sweeping changes in individual human behaviour and collective and institutional social practices, many ecopolitical theorists (e.g., Torgerson 1999; Dobson 2003) argue that it is necessary to involve people democratically in the process, not only to promote justice but also to ensure the consent and on-going active participation of all concerned. In addition to positing it as the most appropriate means of articulating this green democratic involvement, many see citizenship as a way to change individual behavior: to foster values of stewardship and ecological virtue in local places and in global civil society (Dobson 2003). This green writing on citizenship offers valuable challenges to those theorists (feminists included) who make little room for ecological questions in their understandings of citizenship.

However, there is a need to critically analyze green approaches to citizenship from a feminist perspective. Conceptions of environmental citizenship almost always entail a long list of individual behavioural changes, such as reducing household consumption by increasing self-provisioning or simply “doing without”, which are highly labour and time intensive. Climate change has brought a sense of urgency to this list of mitigation strategies and has opened the door to more extreme measures, such as carbon rationing and personal carbon credits. Problems arise with these strategies when green theorists hold a one-dimensional understanding of the private sphere, describing it as primarily a place of consumption and giving little or no consideration to the division of labour within it. This is worrying for feminists because, when household activities are seen in gender-neutral terms, environmental policies that address them are aimed at citizens in general, with no specific recognition of the roles they play (Vinz 2009). The emphasis on individual lifestyle change as central to environmental citizenship has prompted feminist critics to warn against the privatisation and feminisation of environmental responsibility (MacGregor 2006). Gender-blind policies and strategies carry the risk of perpetuating existing inequalities. As Beate Littig (2001, 23) writes, for example, the “end-of-the pipeline strategy (i.e., separating the waste instead of reducing packaging) of environmental politics usually represents more work for women since they are responsible for reproductive labour (...). The feminist critique is mainly aimed at the fact that contemporary environmental policy preserves (...) the traditional gendered division of labour and responsibilities”.

Given that neoliberal governments are downloading the responsibility and work of caring onto the private sphere at the same time that green citizenship proponents en-

vision a greater role for individuals in “doing their bit for the planet”, what does this mean for care-givers who participate in the public domain as citizens? My research with women in Canada found that, in addition to providing inspiration for becoming active in local environmental campaigns, caring responsibilities can also interfere with the practice of citizenship (see MacGregor 2005, 2006). This is not surprising, since – as feminists have been pointing out for decades – the public practice of citizenship has been kept separate from private life, even though private acts are a precondition for citizenship (Lister 1997). The women in my study reported that, without the support of such services as child care and elder care, it was difficult to juggle their household work with their civic participation. Many of them reported being “burnt out” from taking on three very time-consuming burdens of responsibility: unpaid caring, paid work, and active environmental citizenship. A paradox of these women’s lives was that they continued to work to improve the environmental quality in their communities at the same time that they jeopardized their own health and well-being. Clearly this situation should be of concern to ecofeminists. Rather than ask, “who cares for the carers?”, however, celebratory narratives of women’s “earthcare” sweep this paradox under the carpet. As noted above, I believe that such narratives are unstrategic, because they do very little to change the structures that support and produce gender inequality and continue to leave the gender blindness of green and neoliberal men unchallenged. Few ecofeminists have addressed these issues because, in spite of their interest in women’s grassroots activism, few regard what women activists do as an expression of citizenship. My contention is that this is precisely what ecofeminist scholarship ought to do.

The project of feminist ecological citizenship

Why citizenship? In recent years there has been a renaissance of feminist interest in citizenship for a number of reasons relevant to ecofeminist politics. First, in joining conversations about citizenship that have been growing in the social sciences in recent decades, feminists make the important argument that this ostensibly gender-neutral concept is actually deeply gendered. Second, many feminists are analyzing the gendered nature of citizenship in the context of societies where capitalist globalization and a right-wing backlash against the welfare state have led to a decrease in social rights and an increase in individual duties. Rather than accepting a neoliberal definition of citizenship, some feminist theorists want to reinvigorate citizenship as a political location from which to destabilize the boundaries between public and private and to argue for the collective provision of social goods like care (cf. Lister 1997). Third, some feminist political theorists see citizenship as a response to the feminist embrace of an essentializing identity politics that obliges women to present themselves as women in politics (e.g., Voet 1998). Recognizing that “woman” is an internally diverse concept and that women have multiple and shifting identities, these theorists argue that the political construct of citizen should be seen as an “articulating principle” (Mouffe 1992, 375), because it can be at once pluralistic and

yet unifying enough to foster a politics of “solidarity in difference” (see also Yuval-Davis 1997). From this feminist perspective, fixing a feminine (or maternal) foundation for politics is undemocratic and apolitical because, by defining one identity as “authentic”, it shuts down debate among women. Citizenship, on the other hand, provides an inclusive space for public performances of political subjectivity that destabilize and resist dominant ideologies of gender.

Informed by these feminist approaches to citizenship, and drawing on those ecofeminists who have considered its merit for ecological politics (e.g., Sandilands 1999), I argue for a project of feminist ecological citizenship. I believe that it is a project worth pursuing, because citizenship, defined in feminist terms, offers a way to develop ecofeminist positions that are non-essentialist, democratic, and oppositional. In short, it offers the prospect of putting the wind of democratic politics back into ecofeminist sails. As a theoretical project, it will not provide definite answers, but it may provide a way to move beyond the internal debates (especially over women’s essential or ascribed concern for nature and knowledge of sustainability) that have been largely counterproductive to ecofeminism. Some have argued that ecofeminism’s negative reputation for being ideological rather than scholarly, mired in internecine debates rather than making contributions to green politics, has resulted in a general avoidance of doing much-needed gender and environment research in recent years (Banerje/Bell 2007; Seager 2003). Finding a common language through which to articulate ecofeminist critiques and visions of sustainability seems an urgent priority. As I would develop it, feminist ecological citizenship has the potential to act as a positive political identity that allows women to express their gender-related concerns for environmental sustainability, but does not forever tie women (in general) to the private sphere of care and maternal virtue. The cultivation of a democratic public culture in which to debate issues of environmental justice – which includes the collective responsibility for human and non-human well-being – is central to this project. Such a feminist approach to ecological citizenship provides a position from which to call into question the public-private divide that is taken for granted in both neoliberalism and green citizenship theory, as well as in ecofeminist narratives that celebrate women’s caring. The very fact of its redrawing by those on the left and the right shows that the boundary between public and private spheres is not fixed, but is rather a social and political construction that is fluid and changeable. What makes feminist ecological citizenship distinct from other approaches is that it refuses the privatization and feminization of care and calls for public debate and action on how foundational acts of labour (e.g., care) can be reorganized to allow for women’s equal participation as citizens. Care is thereby *politicized* as a necessary part of citizenship, rather than as a “natural resource” that sustains action in the public sphere. A key part of the project of feminist ecological citizenship is to call for the democratization of the household so that household and caring tasks are divided fairly between men and women. As Plumwood points out, “a better integration of democracy with everyday life can provide some of the necessary conditions for a public

political morality” (1995, 157). The other side of the coin is that caring work needs to be supported institutionally by the state, by the market and in the workplace. Another key aspect of the project should, therefore, be principled feminist resistance to established gender codes through the practice of citizenship. The project may thus involve the renewal of feminist consciousness-raising that inspires women to claim the political identity of citizen rather than to justify their concerns by their roles as mothers or care-givers. For example, as citizens, women who do unpaid life-sustaining labour might refuse being exploited and demand recognition through state support, either through direct funding or tax breaks. As citizens, when the tasks are being divided up among members of a social-movement organization, women might challenge gendered assumptions about appropriate tasks for men and women. As citizens, women might resist social expectations that they should naturally be able to take on ever expanding loads of care at home, in the community and for the planet. Finally, feminist ecological citizenship discourse has the potential to provide a common language through which ecofeminists may engage in much-needed encounters with other branches of green scholarship that share their interest in sustainable human-nature relationships but yet have understandings of citizenship that are woefully gender-blind. While green politics does question the boundary between public and private – framed in terms of the obligations and duties of citizens – there is scant recognition that what takes place in the private sphere is much more than consumption and reproduction. Green thinkers must begin to see care not only as an ethic or virtue that can inform citizenship, but also as a set of time-consuming practices (including educating, nursing, cleaning and laundering, buying, growing and cooking food, establishing and maintaining social connections, managing family timetables, and so on!) that make citizenship possible. They need to take this feminist analysis seriously, so that a counter-hegemonic coalition of greens and ecofeminists can be established. I suggest that joining with the green men in this kind of conversation about citizenship – and working together to challenge neoliberalism - is a more strategic choice for ecofeminism than continuing to assert women’s moral superiority on ecological sustainability from the margins.

Notes

- 1 Responsibilisation is a term used by Anglo neo-Foucauldian theorists to refer to a process by which individuals internalize a sense of responsibility for their own well-being so that the onus for providing social goods is taken of the state. For example, individual citizens become responsibilised to prevent becoming unemployed or ill, and thus do not assume it to be the role of their governments to provide jobs or health care.

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