



**Review of *Ecofeminism as Politics: Nature, Marx and the Postmodern*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition by Ariel Salleh.** 2017. London: Zed Books. 369 pages, ISBN 978-1-7869-9040-2 Paper (\$25.00)

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In this 2<sup>nd</sup> (and 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary) edition of her now classic work, Ariel Salleh charts an ambitious course for addressing the challenges of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, in which global capitalism continues to amplify its predatory march against efforts to promote economic, gender, and environmental justice, and few scholarly fields seem equipped to theorize a way forward. In a cogent and original response to these conditions of oppression and repression, Salleh produces a wide-ranging and far reaching analysis and critique that links green, feminist, socialist, and postcolonial theory. She draws insights from the sociology of knowledge, the politics of social movements, and environmental ethics, and integrates these with ideas from philosophy, psychoanalysis, political economy, and biology.

The basic premise of ecofeminism, according to Salleh, is that our ecological crises are a result of a “[e]urocentric capitalist patriarchal culture built on the domination of Nature, and domination of Woman ‘as nature.’ Or, to turn the subliminal Man/Woman=Nature equation around the other way, it is the inevitable effect of a culture constructed on the domination of women, and the domination of Nature ‘as feminine.’” (35). This viewpoint is consistent with other leading ecofeminist theorists and has, in my estimation, enjoyed a resurgence of interest in recent years, as a new generation of students and activists interested in feminist theory and gender studies has



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insisted on a closer examination of the ways in which concepts like patriarchy, heteronormativity, androcentrism, anthropocentrism, and intersectionality may be applied more creatively and radically within and beyond the human species. I also find that more and more scholars are turning to ecofeminism as a way of deepening and expanding the gender analysis that is missing from much of the field of environmental justice studies.

The main challenge of this book is to articulate the fact that, for Salleh, ecofeminism expresses an “embodied materialism” that subverts the Eurocentric view that places Man over and above Woman and Nature. Embodied materialism focuses on the recognition of the othered labor produced by women, indigenous peoples, and peasants, whose caring work and productive energies are discounted and minimized by the dominant economic and social system. Salleh concludes that the experiences of those populations must be at the center of our politics if we have any hope of confronting the violence and brutality of global capitalism today.

Salleh launches critiques at several scholarly and political traditions in order to move her broader argument forward. For example, liberals and socialists have tended to suppress gender difference in hopes of supporting movements for a greater humanity, community or class, but Salleh sees this as counterproductive if we seek to build a mass ecological consciousness. She points out that many Greens claim that their core values are built around caring and connectedness, but yet they fail to go further and ask, who in our societies already shares and acts on those values? For Salleh the answer is women, and this is a population of historical agents in a time of environmental crises whose contributions, experiences, knowledge, and insights are minimized and ignored at our peril. Salleh writes that the basis of her argument for women’s historical agency is that women undertake the vast majority of the world’s work for almost no pay, and are therefore effectively “the proletariat.” Connecting historical materialism to eco-socialism, Salleh argues that “since the interest of women as a global majority lies in challenging existing productivist structures, women as an economic underclass are astonishingly well placed to bring about the social changes requisite for ecological revolution” (25).

For Salleh, postmodern critique is also ill equipped to address today’s myriad socio-ecological crises since, in her estimation, it assumes “the relation between words and actions to be unknowable”; “its micro-political focus on texts distracts attention from the New World Order and its materiality”; and, “as a discursive pluralism it has no way of grounding an alternative vision” (xxii). Scholars of the postmodernist and poststructuralist traditions will no doubt take exception to Salleh’s separation of discourse and text from materiality, but her book in many ways prefigured and laid the groundwork for the “material turn” across various disciplines that occurred precisely as a response to the perceived overemphasis on representation and text found in postmodernist and poststructuralist theory.

In a close and engaging reading of Marx, Salleh argues that, despite his clear attentiveness to key questions of ecology as they concern labor power and the human condition, his labour theory of value implicitly relegates women's reproductive and restorative activities to the unproductive resource side of the equation. This critique of the patriarchal biases and underpinnings in Marxist theory also applies to much of the politics of red-green movements, including her contention that it tends to reproduce a binary between the feminine reproductive space of necessity and the masculine productive space of freedom. Moreover, while his colleague Engels produced landmark generative writing on gender relations in *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State*, those ideas were never truly integrated into Marx's own analysis as a whole (126). She finds that much of Marxist thought has excluded the specific struggles and contributions of women from the proletariat, despite the fact that women do the vast majority of the world's human labor for little or no compensation.

Salleh argues, however, that Marx can be recuperated in a way that would allow for one to support a "notion of species reproduction as human labour" by recalling his view that "[t]his consumption describes the body's bioenergetic metabolism with nature during the exertion of work. Similarly, in carrying, bearing and breast-feeding a child, a woman consumes her own body while converting nature into a 'higher' form. Feminists would prefer to say 'another' form here. But in any event, there is no reason in the world why one exertion should be canonized as a labor creating 'value' and the other not" (128). Her view is that while much of Marxist thinking suffers from both androcentrism and anthropocentrism, an ecocentric politics will likely be a much more generative and hopeful path forward.

For Salleh, the dynamics of sex-gender inequality undergird all other forms of oppression, and yet this problem is rarely addressed by environmentalists, socialists, and other forms of knowledge and politics, and is frequently only addressed superficially by much of feminist theory. In the chapter "When Feminism Fails," Salleh offers a direct challenge to many global North feminists and liberal feminists who have willingly cooperated with states and neoliberal institutions to minimize or silence the influence of global South feminists and women of color. For Salleh, ecofeminism must not just be about feminism, but also an embrace of womanist theory and politics, which functions in solidarity with global South and indigenous knowledges that are focused on justice and liberation broadly defined, including racial justice and sovereignty. This is critical because many liberal feminists, socialists, and greens in the global North seem largely unaware of the ways in which their "lives are embedded in destructive technologies" (167) which have disproportionate and horrifying consequences for people of color, indigenous peoples, and global ecosystems.

I applaud Salleh for pointing out important and consequential differences between various feminist approaches to social change, with particularly strong critiques of global North feminists who may ignore and/or abuse their own racial/ethnic and economic privileges in order to promote agendas that erase the experience of global South and indigenous women and communities. In Salleh's estimation, that brand of liberal feminism works to promote global capitalism while undermining the struggles and experiences of global South women. Salleh also challenges some indigenous activists in Australia who have argued that the term "wilderness" is oppressive since it reinforces the concept of *terra nullius* (the myth of "empty land," which, in Australia, enabled white colonizers to legally support their conquest of the land *and* the supposedly absent people). While Salleh shares the concerns driving this move, she finds that approach to be problematic: "When indigenous activists argue that 'wilderness' is an oppressive term they essentialise and kill off a highly subversive conceptual tool. To totalize the *terra nullius* connotation of wilderness is to internalize the master's racism. It also plays into the hands of extractive industries such as mining or bio-prospecting, which would love to see wilderness go by the board. For the wild speaks potentials to rediscover in ourselves. Moreover, by the ecocentric ethic land is never vacant as in *terra nullius*, but an intractable subject in its own right" (193). That may be so, but indigenous activists often express deep concerns about being associated with "the wild" because that discursive move tends to fuel the colonial, anti-indigenous imagination *and* policy-making. Salleh's aim here parallels her view that ecofeminists should not shy away from discussions of women, nature, and biology in ways that are transformative and rooted in cultural politics, simply because of the longstanding critique of an earlier essentialist strand of ecofeminist theory. I agree with her intention and find her willingness to take on these battles admirable and ambitious.

Salleh devotes an entire chapter ("Ecofeminist Actions") to an examination of a breath-taking spectrum of ecofeminist social movement actions, movements, protests, conferences, artistry, research, writings, and myriad publications by women from all corners of the earth. These actions are focused on, for example, mining, militarism, sexual violence, pesticides, industrial chlorine's harms, nuclear power, police violence, biocolonization, nonhuman animal abuse and consumption, and misogyny in popular culture. This chapter is extraordinary in its range and scope and will surprise many readers at just how intensely well-organized both local and global ecofeminist movements have been for decades. The material here also persuasively places the burden on scholars of socialism and ecology, who, in Salleh's view, have rendered women's political agency "all but invisible" (61).

In the chapter on "Body Logic: 1/0 Culture," Salleh draws on psychoanalytic theory, the sociology of knowledge, and historical texts to interrogate the driving forces and widespread acceptance of patriarchy, as evidenced in the pervasive cultural framework in which men are

superior to women, culture is superior to nature, and in which the Great Chain of Being is a system of thought and action in which “most women have been reined in, domesticated; the rest have been resources as ‘dirty animal’ whores” (64). The Great Chain of Being comes out of the Judeo-Christian tradition and is a hierarchy of dominations, with God and white men at the apex, followed by white women, people of color, children, nonhumans, plants, air, water, and rocks, in a unified map of racial, gender, and species inequalities justified by the Creator. In this system, men are valued symbolically as a 1 while women are devalued symbolically as a 0, hence the concept of a “1/0 culture.” Salleh challenges these ideas with dialectical reasoning, through which “we can open out the multiple potentials contained in our condition” (65). Global capitalist patriarchy is obsessed with control, ordering, planning, purity, and management of bodies, genes, land, and finances, but is unable to account for the fact that such a system is destroying and destabilizing the very life support systems that make it possible.

In the last chapters of the book, Salleh presents and grapples with ideas and practices that can offer transformation and hope. For example, she links Sara Ruddick’s concept of “holding” (practices that minimize risk and reconcile differences rather than sharply accentuating them) to ecopolitics by casting it as “the ultimate expression of adaptability” because it is centered on holding things together and interconnectedness, rather than the separation of space and time, and the fixation on controlling bodies and others (215). She demonstrates this concept in action by examining everyday behaviors among women around the world.

Finally, this volume does an outstanding job of responding to the popular misconception that ecofeminism is only concerned with women and gender justice. In fact, Salleh demonstrates that ecofeminism is a movement and system of thought focused on the liberation of all persons and beings, which is why it is increasingly finding an audience among scholars of environmental justice, ethnic studies, and critical animal studies. *Ecofeminism as Politics* is a powerful work of scholarship that will continue to shape our thinking, debates, and actions concerning inequalities, ecology, and justice for generations to come.