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Review of "Feminism & Ecology" (1997) by Mary Mellor

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BOOK REVIEWS

Feminism & Ecology, by Mary Mellor. New York: New York University Press, 1997, 221 pp.

According to Mary Mellor, the "overall aim of this book is to explore the history and development of the various strands of ecofeminism and their relationship to elements of feminism(s) and ecologism(s)" (p. 10). To this end, she has accomplished a thorough analysis. The book is heavily theory oriented, and as such is most suited for academicians and others interested in learning the intricacies of the triadic relationship between ecofeminisms, feminisms, and ecologisms.

Feminism & Ecology, however, is not simply a descriptive analysis. Mellor is also attempting to construct a normative argument through her assessment of the shortcomings of the various positions that she analyzes. By advocating a "radical materialist ecofeminism" grounded in an "immanent realism," Mellor attempts to quash traditional critiques of ecofeminism/feminism, such as the charge of "essentialism" and the claim that feminism privileges local knowledges (perspectives). Mellor's normative argument is not, theoretically speaking, entirely implausible, but the reader may be less convinced of the book's efficacy in this respect. However, even if the reader does not find Mellor convincing, the book remains extremely valuable for its descriptive analysis alone.

The book is divided into eight chapters. In the introduction, Mellor succinctly presents her aims and purposes in writing the book, as well as short chapter-by-chapter descriptions. Chapter 2 examines the historical origins of ecofeminism, including its ties to grassroots movements of the South and theoretical underpinnings in the North. Chapter 3 examines the various schools of thought and their differences within ecofeminism, which, according to Mellor, is a debate confined primarily to the North. The way in which Mellor frames this debate is significant in terms of her proposed resolution.

She claims that ecofeminism can roughly be divided into two schools: "affinity" ecofeminism, which is connected with a radical/cultural/spiritual conception of women's relation to nature, and a "socialist" ecofeminism, which adopts a more structuralist (i.e., Marxist) analysis of the problem. Mellor is clearly in the socialist-ecofeminist camp. She claims that the accusations of essentialism stem primarily from the affinity brand of ecofeminism, which tends to assert that women are fundamentally (i.e., essentially) "closer" to nature.

Chapter 4 is largely an attempt to respond to essentialist/reductionist critiques of feminism/ecofeminism. Here, Mellor begins to formulate her position regarding the "embeddedness" and "embodiedness" of humans within nature. She argues that

women are not essentially closer to nature, but that they are more "aware" of their embeddedness. Analyzing the human-nature relationship from an ecofeminist perspective can, according to Mellor, reveal the hierarchical structures that are the true sources of the destructive tendencies toward nature and women.

In the next chapter, Mellor attempts to respond to postmodern critiques of feminist "standpoint" theory, which asserts that women, as well as other marginalized groups, possess a "privileged" epistemological perspective. Mellor claims that the postmodern perspective, which denies that there can be any privileged standpoint, goes too far. She argues instead that the material fact of "inequality" is the starting point, not a particular people or standpoint.

Chapter 6 on "Feminism and the Green Movement" is primarily a discussion of the deep ecology/ecofeminism debate. Deep ecologists posit a radical ecocentrism and argue that what is needed is a fundamental shift in our perspective of the human-nature relationship. That is, through a process of "self-realization," humans can begin to take their true place in nature as simply one species among the multitude inhabiting the earth. Mellor argues that deep ecology's ecocentrism is necessarily dualistic in that it treats humans as "outsiders" who have disrupted the harmony of nature. Furthermore, deep ecology ignores the material analysis necessary to get to the root of the disparities causing the environmental/social problems. Instead, Mellor advocates a "deep material analysis" that emphasizes an "ecological holist" perspective.

Chapter 7 centers on the ecofeminist/social ecologist debate. Social ecology (primarily represented in the work of Murray Bookchin), according to Mellor, mistakenly argues for the "correct" application of science and technology to achieve liberation by "transcending" oppressive material conditions. Additionally, social ecology tends to overemphasize the role of human "rationality" and downplays the "voice" of nature. In contrast, Mellor wants to give nature agency and place humans within nature. She advocates an "immanent realist" perspective grounded in a thorough materialist analysis, which she believes leads to the conclusion that the domination of women is one of the original forms of oppression.

In the final chapter, Mellor nicely summarizes her analysis and presents her recommendation: "deep materialist ecofeminism" acknowledges the embodiment of all humans, and this embodiment is borne disproportionately by women. According to Mellor, the real problem is "filiarchy," not "patriarchy"; that is, autonomous living is the problem, not male domination. There are a minority of humans (i.e., the one-fifth who consume a majority of the world's resources) that live as if they were autonomous, or disembodied, from nature. Women and other oppressed peoples, however, disproportionately bear the burden of the disembodied living of the few.

Mellor, therefore, emphasizes "immanent realism" over the transcendence of social ecology, and "ecological holism" over the dualistic ecocentrism of deep ecology. She postulates a modified standpoint theory that underscores the "structures of mediation in sex/gendered systems" as the basis for ecofeminism rather than advocating women's "affinity" with nature. In other words, she attempts to circumvent the traditional problems of standpoint theory by focusing on the social structures produced by a particular relationship with nature.

Overall, the reader may not be convinced by Mellor's argument. She does not appear to have escaped the traditional specters of feminism: essentialism and the privileging of a particular standpoint. Additionally, even if Mellor is granted what she claims to have accomplished—a deeper critique/analysis of the problem through her version of ecofeminism—she offers no explicit pathway for transformation. One possible reason why is that her framing of the problem, which emphasizes the improper mediation of nature (i.e., living as if disembodied), actually overstresses the human-(first)nature relationship. Mellor is correct to focus on the “limits” of nature as a guiding principle in our mediation with nature. However, she does not adequately address the fact that many humans are now deeply embedded in “second” and “third” nature. Clearly, much of the world is still “mediating” with first nature, but the crux of the problem is the multitude that are so far removed from first nature that mediation is no longer possible. To address this problem in any meaningful way, it seems necessary not only to reveal the sources of this dilemma but also to suggest a way out.

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The Idea of Biodiversity: Philosophies of Paradise, by David Takacs. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996, xix + 392 pp.

Biodiversity has made a transformation from a scientific concept to a political slogan within the space of just over a decade. During the 1990s, it has become the latest “big” environmental issue, comparable to acid rain, ozone depletion and climate change. Biodiversity has given a new name to a number of environmental issues such as the conservation of wilderness areas, the mass extinction of species, the preservation of genetic resources for agriculture, and the possibility of a global environmental catastrophe in general.

As a scientific concept, biodiversity brings together three different levels of diversity: genetic, species, and ecosystem. Variety and heterogeneity are essential aspects of the dynamics of life at all these levels. This conceptual invention, depicted in terms of biotic diversity or biological diversity, is usually traced to the late 1970s and early 1980s and the birth of a new discipline (i.e., conservation biology). The idea of biodiversity also has its roots in ecology, evolutionary biology, genetics, and environmental ethics. The strong connection to this new discipline, conservation biology, makes biodiversity somewhat different from previous important environmental issues. And it is within this discipline that David Takacs looks for the roots of the success story.

Takacs interviewed twenty-three conservation biologists. The book is centered on these interviews. Takacs spoke to some very famous people, including David Ehrenfeld,