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***Ecofeminist Thought and Practice\****

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In recent years, the degrowth movement has forcefully brought attention to the need to escape market tyranny and the destructive spiral of the capitalist economic system. Can the critique against the paradigm of unlimited growth, the drive towards an economy not based on money and respectful of nature, find common ground with the perspectives offered by feminism, particularly ecofeminism, of a moral economy based on the preservation of life and on subsistence, freed from dominion over women and over nature?<sup>1</sup>

Reproducing and protecting human life in collaboration and harmony with nature is what women have been doing since time immemorial, an unacknowledged task, naturalised, made invisible, slavish and servile. Recovering the values wherein women have always recognised themselves and initiating a process of economic and cultural change means, primarily, deconstructing the system of thought that has justified and justifies the oppression of women and the exploitation of animals and nature. Given, in fact, that economic growth is not a neutral process with regard to gender, the degrowth project cannot avoid investigating in depth the relationship between patriarchy and capitalism.

Stemming from the origins of the ecofeminist movement, this paper briefly traces the theoretical elaborations of ecofeminism regarding the origins of patriarchal dominion and the task of reproduction, focussing on contemporary movements – in which women unquestionably play a key role – in defence of the environment, of the subsistence and dignity of all living beings, and finally examining how politics and democracy are perceived.

### **The origins of a movement**

I know I am made from this earth, as my mother's hands were made from this earth, as her dreams came from this earth and all that I know, I know in this earth...all that I know speaks to me through this earth and I long to tell you, you who are earth too, and listen as we speak to each other of what we know: the light is in us (Griffin 1978, p. 227).

So wrote Susan Griffin, in 1978, in her work *Women and Nature: The Roaring Inside Her*, a seminal text of ecofeminist thought. In this “poem that includes history” (Cantrell 1996, p. 198), alternating scenarios of the oppression of women and of nature, the author traces the history of Western civilisation. The bond which that tradition had established between women and nature, in Griffin's opinion, had to be overturned positively and take on a liberating significance. Acquiring a deep awareness of our origins, of our present and of our aim – the author also suggests – means acquiring a full awareness of the interconnection with every single plant, animal and human life, forming a single body with the planet. *Women and Nature* touched upon themes which would be taken up anew over the following years: the

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<sup>1</sup> I am using the term subsistence according to the meaning recently attributed to it by Maria Mies and Veronika Bennholdt-Thomsen, namely that whence one's own existence derives. The idea of subsistence is in contrast to the notion of ‘welfare’ as it is commonly understood in Western countries, based on growth in the production of goods and on money, since this implies the destruction of nature, of life and “of all that we call humanity” (V. Bennholdt-Thomsen-M. Mies 2005, p. 11).

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relationship between human beings and animals and the liability of science and technology in the destruction of the environment. In those years, nature became a feminist issue. This was forcefully stated by Rosemary Ruether in 1975:

Women must see that there can be no liberation for them and no solution to the ecological crisis within a society whose fundamental model of relationships continues to be one of domination. They must unite the demands of the women's movement with those of the ecological movement to envision a radical reshaping of the basic socioeconomic relations and the underlying values of this [modern industrial] society (Ruether 1975, p. 204).

In 1962, it was the work of another woman, *Silent Spring* by Rachael Carson, that sowed the seeds of the modern ecology movement. Denouncing the consequences for human and animal life of insecticides and other “elixirs of death”, the American biologist provided a reminder of the greater vulnerability of women and children as regards pollution (Carson 1999, p. 204). In a piece of poetic prose that echoed her love of nature, Carson offered a radical critique of science which anticipated that advanced by contemporary ecofeminism: the desire for dominion over nature, perceived purely as a resource, was destroying life on the planet.

Belittled and derided in government and industrial circles, Carson's work greatly influenced movements which emerged in the USA a decade later. In fact, these movements – feminist, pacifist, antinuclear, animal welfarist and environmentalist – increasingly professed an awareness that the ideology justifying oppression on the basis of race, class, gender, sexuality or species is the same as that which sanctions dominion over nature. Such an awareness went hand in hand with a new way of perceiving and experiencing our bond with nature, with a need for new symbols and languages; terms like ‘mother earth’ or ‘healing the earth’ became common, as did references to ancient religions and myths.

In literature, too, the subject of the relationship between the oppression of women and dominion over nature came sharply to prominence, particularly in the context of women and feminists' ideal vision. Returning to the central image of Carson's work, nature is often described as silent; humans are no longer able to listen to its language. Only when they begin to tune in to nature will they be able to work towards its preservation. Through the literary devices of fantastic literature, novels and utopian tales see women living in synch with nature in a dynamic, spiritual and communicative network, and freely developing those feminine qualities of theirs that patriarchal power has always stifled.

Notwithstanding the variety of the themes treated and of its plots, feminist utopian literature has contributed to the deconstruction of patriarchal culture, uncovered the incongruities of the thought on which it is based, undermined it through the subtle art of irony, contributed to the spreading of an ecological sensibility and anticipated or developed the themes of ecofeminist thinking (Moylan 1986).

As it is known, the term ecofeminism first appeared in 1974, in a piece of writing by Françoise d'Eaubonne, *Le féminisme ou la mort* (Feminism or Death), in which the French feminist examined the environmental costs of ‘development’ and identified women as the subjects of the change. In 1978, she founded the *Écologie et Féminisme* movement which, although it made little impact in France, attracted considerable interest in Australia and the USA. 1974 also saw the appearance of a brief article by the American anthropologist Sherry Ortner, which was to become a

key point of reference in ecofeminist thought. In *Is Female to Male as Nature Is to Culture?* Ortner, taking her lead from the universality of women's subordination in all cultures, suggested a deep investigation into the origins of violence and, in order to trace the history, proposed a return to the differences inscribed on the body. Men, who lack any natural creative functions, must (or have the chance to) assert their own creativity artificially, by way of technics. "In so doing, they create objects that are relatively long-lasting, eternal, transcendent, in contrast to women, who simply create human beings, ephemeral mortal creatures" (Ortner 1974, p. 75). This would explain, in the author's view, why activities aimed at suppressing life (weapons were the first artefacts) have always enjoyed great prestige, while feminine ones aimed at creating and preserving life have been belittled.

"What are the historical and theoretical relationships between women and nature and men and culture? How should the questions put by Sherry Ortner be answered?" It was these questions that, back in 1984, opened the monographic edition of the *Environmental Review*, devoted to women and the environment<sup>2</sup>, but as early as 1974 ecofeminism, particularly cultural and spiritual themes, became the subject of academic study, university courses and conferences. In 1974 a conference was held at Berkeley entitled *Woman and Environment*, organised by two geographers, Sandra Marburg and Lisa Watkins. In March 1980, at Amherst, Massachusetts, a conference was held entitled *Women and Life on Earth*, which saw the participation of representatives from movements in defence of the environment which had spread all over the world.

In the USA, particularly, in the years which between the two conferences, the protests against the production of nuclear energy and war had reached their peak and numerous women's associations were founded in defence of the environment and health; 1977 saw the emergence of Women of All Red Nations (WARN) – a movement wherein women presented themselves as spiritual guides for the community – to protest against the compulsory sterilisation of native women, the removal of land from reserves and the localisation of dangerous factories on Indian territory. In 1980, the association raised the alarm over the increase in the births of deformed babies and miscarriages due to radioactive waste. In 1978, Lois Gibbs, at Love Canal, New York State, began the fight against the toxic waste dump responsible for very serious health problems affecting inhabitants and, in 1981, she founded the Citizens Clearinghouse for Hazardous Waste (CCHW), which promoted four thousand campaigns against toxic waste in various centres around the country (Mellor 1997, p. 22). In the protests against toxic waste and pesticides, women unquestionably played the leading role. The body, the home and the community became the loci of women's experience and protest in the USA, Canada, Australia and Sweden (Merchant 1995, pp. 139-145) and also, later, in Europe and in Italy.

Ecological impacts and consequences are experienced through human bodies, in ill health, early death, congenital damage and impeded childhood development. Women disproportionately bear the consequences of those impacts within their own bodies (dioxin residues in breast milk, failed pregnancies) and in their work as nurturers and carers. Some ecofeminists have gone further and argued that women have a greater appreciation of humani-

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<sup>2</sup> The monographic edition, entitled *Women and Environment*, was edited by Carolyn Merchant.

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ty's relationship to the natural world, its embeddedness and embodiedness, through their own embodiment as female (Mellor 1997, p. 2)

In the 1970s, women's movements that spontaneously grew all around the world revealed the link between the health and the lives of women and the destruction of nature. An awareness of women's vulnerability in the face of environmental degradation and a desire to have a voice in decision-making processes were common to all these campaigns, which had been cropping up spontaneously.

In 1973, the *chipko* movement began, in defence of the Himalayan forests and of the subsistence-based economy pursued by women, in harmony with nature. In 1977, Wangari Maathai set up the reforestation project in Kenya, the main aims of which were to promote a positive image of women and their independence (Weber 1988; Michaelson 1994; Shiva 2002; Maathai 2006; Maathai 2010).

Between 1980 and 1981, two very important events made the movement visible on an international level: in 1980, in Washington, two-thousand women surrounded the Pentagon to protest against nuclear power, and in 1981 a protest was held at the Greenham Common missile base in England. The possible annihilation of the planet by destructive technology was among the main concerns in these protests. The subject of the relationship between science, women and nature was among the first towards which ecofeminist attention was drawn.

### Gender and science

In 1980, a piece of research appeared in the USA that marked a decisive turning point in historical study and for ecofeminist thought: *The Death of Nature. Women, Ecology and the Scientific Revolution*, by Carolyn Merchant. The thousand-year-old links between women and nature – the author writes in her Introduction – were, since the 1960s, brought to the foreground by the simultaneity of the ecologist and feminist movements. The new social concerns which formed the basis of the two movements had laid the foundations for a new alliance and presented new intellectual and historical problems. Nature's ancient identity as a nourishing mother led to a connection between the history of women and that of the environment.

Feminist history requires that we look at history with equalitarian eyes, seeing it anew from the viewpoint not only of women but also of social and racial groups and the natural environment, previously ignored as the underlying resources on which Western culture and its progress have been built. To write history from a feminist perspective is to turn it upside down, to see the social structure from the bottom up and to flip-flop mainstream values (Merchant 1989, p. XX).

Beginning with the dilemma of the environment and its links with science and technology, Carolyn Merchant reconstructed the process of forming a vision of the world and of a science which, re-conceptualising nature as a machine rather than as a living organism, sanctioned men's dominion over nature and over women. The 'death of nature', its perception as inert material, was necessary in order to eliminate all moral scruples regarding the accelerated and indiscriminate exploitation of natural and human resources. Reducing living beings to the status of machines to be studied and experimented upon, separating reason from emotion and asserting

the superiority of abstract rationalism, scientific thought dissociates men from women, animals and nature, feminises nature and naturalises women. Nature and women exist for men's needs.

In the following years, particularly from 1985 to 1989, ecofeminist thinking on science, women and nature was enriched by important contributions from three physicists. In 1985, a volume appeared by Evelyn Fox Keller, *Reflections on Gender and Science*, translated in Italian and published by Garzanti in 1987 under the title *Sul genere e la scienza*.

"How much of science is bound up with the idea of masculinity and what would it mean for science if this were not the case?" The American biophysicist had already been asking this question in the 1970s, and she attempted to answer it in the collection of essays in the book. Her analysis stems from a critique of two basic stereotypes present in the relationship between women and science: firstly, that linking objectivity with masculinity and subjectivity with femininity, secondly that identifying science as a human activity devoid of values or emotional connotations.

In 1989, the book by the Indian physicist Vandana Shiva, *Staying Alive*, translated into Italian the following year, revealed the consequences of what she called "maledevelopment" for the lives of women and for nature on the Indian subcontinent. Taking as her starting point Gandhi's observations on knowledge being reduced to power, Shiva criticised the modern concept of science as a system which purports to be universal, independent of any ethical values and which stifles pluralistic expressions of knowledge. Scientific reductionism, based upon violent fracture, generates inequality, dominion and poverty. With 'maledevelopment', forests are separated from rivers, the fields from the forests and animals from culture, generating and spreading death.

In the same year, Elisabetta Donini's work, *La nube e il limite. Donne, scienza, percorsi nel tempo* (The Cloud and the Limit: Women and Science over the Course of Time) appeared in Italy. In Italy too, in fact, the women/science nexus had been dealt with by women's movements since 1976, after the Seveso disaster, and then in 1986 after Chernobyl, which gave rise to a new sense of environmental responsibility and a new awareness of limits. A decisive event, Donini recalls, was the seminar organised on 4 July 1986 by women members of the PCI (Italian Communist Party), entitled: *Scienza, potere, coscienza del limite. Dopo Chernobyl: oltre l'estraneità* (Science, Power, Awareness of the Limit. After Chernobyl: Beyond Extraneousness). Women, the Italian physicist writes, collectively re-elaborate "their gaze on science and technics, in a way consistent with the notion of "beginning by oneself".

After Chernobyl, the women who took to the streets spoke a language that was almost impudent in its banality: milk, lettuce, the washing, the children's shoes... But it was precisely by way of that uprising in contemporary life against the great techno-scientific strategies that the ability to create a radical split among the traditional structures of knowledge and power was wedged into place (Donini 1990, p. 9).

The basic premise of science, namely that individual experience can be reassembled in an abstract representation of reality with universal relevance, has thus been challenged by movements and by women's thinking on the basis of the concrete experience of those years. The norms concerning universality and objectivity

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had to be re-examined, as they were contradicted “profoundly, by their intrinsic gender bias” (Donini 1990, p. 19). This reversal of perspective brought about by women’s movements has had very significant results in every discipline.

### **Philosophy and Ethics**

In the late 1980s, ecofeminism had already presented itself as a distinct philosophical theory that offered a new synthesis of the various modern feminist paradigms. Even then, the areas of reflection already ranged from history to the philosophy of science, to theology, to epistemological criticism, to ethics and to economics. In dozens of books and hundreds of essays, the various authors, despite their different approaches, had focused on themes that were to be significantly developed in the 1990s. In providing a brief outline, I will limit myself to highlighting the common basic characteristics.

One of the first important points of reference was a 1987 article by the American philosopher Karen Warren, whose ideas, together with those of the Australian Val Plumwood, were very influential. In *Feminism and Ecology: Making Connections*, Warren invited feminists to turn their attention to ecological problems and to identify the connection between environmental degradation, sexism and other forms of social oppression. Ecofeminism, she claimed, was a philosophical vision, an ethical trend and a political movement.

Just what makes the environment (ecology) a feminist issue? What are some of the alleged connections between the domination of women and the domination of nature? How and why is recognition of these connections important to feminism, environmentalism, and environmental philosophy? Answering these questions is largely what ecofeminism is about (Warren 1996, p. 137).

In 1991, the feminist philosophy journal *Hypatia* devoted a special edition to ecofeminism, subsequently published as a book. All the themes that characterised feminist and ecofeminist reflection – the critique against rationalism, the women/nature connection in the Western theological and philosophical traditions, the ethics of care and the animal question – were dealt with in a philosophical-cultural vein, aimed at highlighting the differences and the interconnections. “Ecofeminist analysis is structurally cross-cultural,” Karen Warren was later to write.

What makes ecological feminism *multicultural* is that it includes in its analysis of women-nature connections the inextricable interconnections among *all* social systems of domination, for instance, racism, classism, ageism, ethnocentrism, imperialism, colonialism, as well as sexism (Warren 1994, p. 2).

What the various male and female writers have in common is the conviction that life on earth is a network of interconnections and that no natural hierarchy exists; hierarchy is a creation by humans which is projected onto nature and used to justify oppression: sexual, social, racial, and so on. Therefore, on a theoretical level, ecofeminism attempts to show all the connections between the various forms of dominion, and its practice is non-hierarchical; among the various schools of thought, it is the most inclusive. In fact, in their analysis of oppression, socialists, feminists, animal welfarists, etc., make distinctions between groups of oppressors

and subjugated parties. These are exclusive theories which, not profoundly grasping the complexity of dominion, in turn create new categories of otherness, allowing the perpetuation of an oppositional way of thinking. Sexism, racism, classism, speciesism and androcentrism are systems of oppression which reciprocally reinforce each other and lead to the degradation of life and the destruction of nature (Warren 1996). What oppressed groups have in common – women, colonised peoples, the poor – is the fact that each has been put on an equal level to nature, each is considered part of nature, outside the sphere of reason and history. The category of ‘nature’ is above all a political category. Aligning oneself with the feminist viewpoint, therefore, does not reflect any desire for contrast, but rather to observe and interpret the world from another perspective, from the bottom, and it is gender perspective that best allows us to lay bare the network of relationships that constitute dominion.

Among white populations, coloured populations, the poor, children, the elderly, the colonised and other human groups threatened by the destruction of the environment, there are those who belong to the female sex, who face the greatest risks and suffer immeasurably greater damage compared with those who belong to the male sex (Warren 2000, p. 2).

Dominion over women is naturally at the centre of every feminist interpretation of dominion, but it also provides an enlightening and well-theorised model for all other forms of dominion, since the oppressed are at once feminised and naturalised (Plumwood 1994, p. 73).

Notwithstanding the diversity of their approaches, the interest of the various women authors is directed towards the broad conceptual framework that authorises all these forms of oppression, therein defined as ‘patriarchy’. Patriarchal conceptual frameworks, which are also the theoretical premises of modern science and of philosophy, are characterised by hierarchy and by conflicting dualisms: high/low, male/female, mind/body, culture/nature, reason/emotion, action/passivity, universal/particular, freedom/necessity, civilised/primitive, public/private, subject/object, and whereas the first term is associated with men and is elevated, the second is associated with women and is devalued. The list could easily go on; every distinction can be treated as a dualism and become a genuine conceptual weapon, constantly revised and refined. Val Plumwood focussed on the nature of dualism in *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature*. Every dualism – the Australian philosopher writes – is linked to the others, forming a labyrinth of oppressive connections, bound by a logical structure characterised by exclusion and denial. Dualism, in fact, is not just a dichotomy or a hierarchy, which can be contingent and surmountable, but a way of thinking that makes equality and relationships out of the question. A dualism is a relationship of separation and dominion characterised by radical exclusion that is not open to change. Religion, philosophy, science, cultural symbols, social models, sexual norms, education and economics reflect this logic of dominion that posits men’s existence in the foreground and drives women’s into the background, viewing the latter as not essential, without a purpose of their own (Plumwood 1993, pp. 41-59).

Through the prioritising of abstract thought, through Aristotle’s sphere of liberty in the life of the *polis* as opposed to the sphere of necessity in the world of the *oikos*, through the liberal distinction between public and private, the world of men



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has been constructed in opposition to the world of nature and that of women. Being a man entails dissociation from the feminine and from what it represents: weakness, care, inclusion. Masculinity can be attained by opposing the concrete world of everyday life, escaping contact with the feminine world of the home in favour of the masculine world of politics or public life. This experience of two worlds lies at the heart of conflicting dualisms. Dualism stems from the denial of dependence on a subordinate 'other'. For the image to emerge of men as superior, active, independent, the creators of culture and of technology, it was necessary to obscure and belittle what was feminine. Only separating culture from nature could produce a patriarchal order of men as self-sufficient and self-made, a symbolic order based on violence against difference, interpreted as inferiority.

Modernity – Cavarero writes – has invented the category of perfect individualism, independent and master of itself.

Ecofeminism, in contrast, emphasising the interconnection between all forms of life, offers an ethical theory based not actually on separation or abstract individualism, but on the values of inclusion, relationships, prioritising the conservation of life and of motherhood, beginning with the awareness of each one's vulnerability (Pulcini 2009). The recurring image in ecofeminist literature is that of weaving and spinning and the ethic it inspires has been defined as a "quilt in the making", "a process similar to patchwork, comprised of cuttings provided by people who live under different socio-economic, cultural and historical conditions [...]. The picture that emerges will depend on the life-experience, the ethical issues and the specific socio-economic and historical contexts of those taking part" (Warren 2000, pp. 66-68; Kheel 2008, p. 214).

The ecofeminist ethic is based above all on empathy, on the ability to hear and listen. It stems from bodily experiences linked to motherhood, and perceives the body as a source of knowledge, not actually as merely biological. It is impossible, in fact, to separate women's ability to create life from women and their bodies, the same bodies that have been robbed of their cultural, human and spiritual dimension and that are manipulated, tortured and commodified. Acknowledging that bodily experience posits women, as regards nature, differently from men, the various women authors have highlighted a different way of knowing, learning and feeling. Feeling the interrelations with living beings and nature demands intense attention towards the reality of the other, and demands power of concentration and of judgement, the ability to grasp the experience of others. The ecofeminist ethic is an emotional and intellectual practice, an ethic of compassion that includes all living beings (Donovan 1996)<sup>3</sup>.

In outlining the shift from a society dominated by the symbolic order of death towards one directed towards life, from a way of thinking that is linear and fragmentary, abstract, and dominated by opposition against a way of thinking that is respectful to subjectivity and individuality, from a politics based on universalistic categories to one that has to do with plurality and difference, ecofeminists have particularly stressed the symbolic nature of motherhood, that is, on what it repre-

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<sup>3</sup> On anti-speciesism and ecofeminism, see A. Zabonati, *Ecofemminismo e questione animale: una introduzione e una rassegna*, in DEP, n. 20, 2012.

sents: giving, caring, embracing the other as unique and unrepeatable. Thereby, the whole Western tradition has been brought into question. In fact, as Adriana Cavarero writes,

Philosophy's primary task lies in ignoring birth, and thus ignoring the locus of the Appearance of the uniqueness and the oneness embodied, where the reality of the new baby and its relationship are intrinsic [...]. So he or she who is born constitutes a relational subjectivity, and prevents the theorisation of a uniqueness that is individualism (Cavarero 2007, p. 73).

## History

Feminist thinking has constantly questioned history, particularly ancient history, with the aim of understanding the origins and causes of the asymmetry between the genders and of sexual division in the workplace. Examining the historical process from the viewpoint of the oppressed, allowing them a place in history, hearing their voices, reconstructing their fight for emancipation, is essential for anyone whose perspective is focussed upon change. Availing themselves of the very numerous studies on the origins of patriarchy carried out since the 19th Century, women historians have wished to go back to the original violence, have deeply examined the connection between dominion over women and the exploitation of nature, between the exploitation of women and the unlimited accumulation and growth paradigm, revealing the network of injustice and oppression wherein patriarchy and capitalism are firmly united.

The works of Jakob Bachofen, Lewis Morgan, Friedrich Engels and Otis Tufton Mason had shown that the oppression of women was a product of history; the widespread notion that the patriarchal family was unchangeable and eternal, based on a law of nature, was nothing but a myth (Taylor Allen 1999). Patriarchy, in fact, had asserted itself in a recent era following economic and social change. The development of agricultural activity and above all of livestock farming – traditionally performed by men – together with their consequent accumulation of wealth, gave rise to the concept of private property, shook the old aristocratic societies and destroyed the collectivism that was typical of matrifocal societies, led to the subjugation of women, to the advent of war and slavery, and to the male monopoly over culture. Conquest over other groups came to entail killing the men and enslaving the women and children to work in the home, on the land and for sexual services.

This non-productive, predatory mode of appropriation became the paradigm of all historical exploitative relations between human beings, Its main mechanism is to transform autonomous human producers into conditions of production for others (Mies 1986, p. 66).

So continued the rise of a new way of perceiving women's traditional activities aimed at providing and giving nourishment; domesticity and motherhood were given a wide historical, social and moral significance. Driven by the desire to feed and protect their children, women had established the first real productive relationship with nature; during this process they acquired a deep knowledge of the generative powers of plants, animals and the land, which they passed on, meaning that they created society and history. Gathering food, wood and medicinal herbs, planting and harvesting agricultural produce, carrying in the womb and taking care of ba-

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bies, “their close understanding of nature has helped the human race to sustain itself in every part of the world” (Merchant 2008, p. 55).

The original egalitarianism (Gimbutas 2005) and the position of women began to decline when they lost their financial independence, when their work, initially public in the context of the community or the village, was transformed into a private service within the confines of the family, an expropriation and confinement that formed part of a process of work specialisation, of the development of commerce and of social stratification. Women were deprived of any control over the production of food, of any authority over distribution and consumption of agricultural products. Other women writers have particularly emphasised the control of women’s sexuality and fertility, when the discovery of men’s role in reproduction, which occurred with the development of livestock farming, became a tool of dominion.

From then on, motherhood was belittled and uprooted from the symbolic order. Whereas in matrifocal societies femininity was the social paradigm for all forms of productivity, the basic active principle in the production of life, in patriarchal and then capitalist society it was emptied of all its active and creative qualities; it was equated with passivity, with a ‘fact of nature’. What are considered really human are male qualities, which lie in physical strength and in thought. In the political order, as narrated by myths and elaborated by ancient philosophical thinking, it is death, violence and war that are foundational. “Birth came to be ignored, not thematised or thought about because birth finds female subjectivity as a protagonist with great, exclusive power” (Cavarero 2007, p. 12).

From studies of ancient societies, despite their unanswered questions and the unclear areas, it has thus emerged that the greatest obstacle to the process of humanising women has been, and is, the way of perceiving work and productivity that has been asserted through patriarchy, and that has been driven to extreme consequences by capitalist development.

### **Patriarchy and capitalism**

One of the criticisms against ecofeminist thought has been that it has emphasised cultural aspects and themes and neglected those of a social nature. Although often based on misunderstandings, these criticisms have provided the stimulus to broaden the field of research and refine theoretical reflection. As far back as the early 1980s, numerous studies foregrounded the relationship between patriarchy and capitalism<sup>4</sup>. Patriarchy is not an idea or an interpretative category, but a system of power relationships which view women and coloured peoples as resources, the same ideology that ransacks nature. This interpretative trend is central to the work of the ‘Bielefeld School’, which includes Maria Mies, Claudia von Werlhof and

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<sup>4</sup> Apart from the works by Mary Mellor and Ariel Salleh cited in the bibliography, on this subject see also Werlhof, 2007.

Veronica Bennholdt-Thomsen. In particular, Maria Mies' work *Patriarchy and Accumulation on a World Scale* has had a notable impact. The writer says in her introduction:

The confusions in the feminist movement worldwide will continue unless we understand the 'woman question' in the context of all social relations that constitute our reality today, that means in the context of a global division of labour under the dictates of capital accumulation. The subordination and exploitation of women, nature, and colonies are the precondition for the continuation of this model (Mies 1986, p. 2).

Drawing on the debate within the feminist movement on the tasks of production and reproduction that had developed over the previous decade, and on Rosa Luxemburg's thought analysis, Maria Mies focused on the significance in capitalist accumulation of unpaid working relationships, such as domestic work in industrialised societies and the subsistence economies of the global south. Recalling the influence of the 1972 writings by Maria Rosa Dalla Costa (*The Power of Women and the Subversion of the Community*) and Selma James (*A Woman's Place*), who first interpreted domestic work as a source for capitalist accumulation, she writes:

The discovery, however, that housework under capitalism had also been excluded per definition from the analysis of the capitalism proper, and that this was the mechanism by which it became a 'colony' and a source for unregulated exploitation, opened our eyes to the analysis of other such colonies of non-wage-labour exploitation, particularly the work of small peasants and women in Third World countries [...]. What [Rosa Luxemburg's writings] opened up for our feminist analysis of women's labour worldwide was a perspective which went beyond the limited horizon of industrialized societies and the housewives in these countries. It further helped to transcend theoretically the various artificial divisions of labor created by capital, particularly the sexual division of labour and the international division of labour by which precisely those areas are made invisible which are to be exploited in non-wage labour relations (Mies 1986, pp. 33-34).

In order to sustain the unlimited growth model, capitalism needs different categories of colonies, women, other peoples and nature. In feminist analysis over recent decades, economics has been interpreted as a clearly-defined system which has excluded or marginalized many aspects of human existence and of non-human nature. The capitalist market, in fact, is nothing more than a small part of all that sustains it, the tip of an iceberg beneath which lies an economy that is invisible, which includes the tasks of reproducing and conserving life and which makes all other activities possible (Forman 1989; Nelson 1997; Pietilä 1997; Barke-Kuiper 2003; Picchio 2003; Mellor 2006; Perkins 2007).

By denying dependence upon the sphere of reproduction and subsistence, women and nature have come to be viewed as unlimited resources. The heart of the environmental crisis lies in denying dependence on the sphere of nature, on the body, on women's work and on reproduction, in line with the false notion of male independence that is inherent to anthropocentrism.

From a theoretical viewpoint, the concept does not concern women in themselves, but that set of human activities which have traditionally been entrusted to women, and associated with them. In this sense, the market economy represents a public world that has been defined by men (but in which many women also take part), modelled on their experience disconnected from the basic necessities of life. Modern economic systems are disembodied and separated from nature.

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In the ‘economics of male experience’, as Mary Mellor calls it, the economic human is adult, physically efficient, mobile, free from domestic responsibilities and from the production procedure relating to the goods and services he consumes, and detached from the ecosystem. In contrast, the work of women, since it reflects the needs of the body, is rooted in local ecosystems and cannot detach itself from its own responsibilities. It represents the basic reality of human existence (Mellor 2006). Charlotte Perkins Gilman, in *Women and Economics*, had in fact defined domestic work as “immediate altruism” (Gilman 1902), the kind of activity that satisfies immediate needs without expecting any financial reward. Maternal sentiment in all cultures symbolises the sustaining of life and many feminists have referred to the symbolic order of the mother in their critique of the unlimited growth paradigm.

If we take as our model of a ‘worker’ not the white male industrial wage-worker, but a *mother*, we can immediately see that her work does not fit into the Marxian concept. For her work is always both: a burden as well as a source of enjoyment, self-fulfilment and happiness. Children may give her a lot of work and trouble, but this work is never totally alienated or dead [...] is still more human than the cold indifference of the industrial worker or engineer *vis à vis* his products, the commodities he produces and consumes (Mies 1986, p. 216)

The motherly act of giving and nourishing, already a point of reference in the Gandhian economy, becomes the symbol and model for another economy, another society in harmony with nature, in which sexual division in the workplace can be overcome. The concept of reproduction in the broadest sense is, as Carolyn Merchant observes, what unites the various features of ecofeminism:

What draws together the various components of the ecofeminist movement is the concept of reproduction in its widest interpretation that includes biological reproduction and social reproduction of life, with the common aim of restoring the natural environment and improving life in the planet (Merchant 2008, p. 58).

### **The subsistence perspective**

Thus in ecofeminist thought there has been the continuous affirmation of a new way of perceiving economics, and a new perspective that Maria Mies and Veronika Bennholdt-Thomsen have called the subsistence perspective. The idea of subsistence is in contrast to that of ‘welfare’ as it is commonly understood in Western countries, based on growth in the production of goods and on money, since this implies the destruction of nature, of life and “of all that we call humanity” (Bennholdt-Thomsen-Mies 2005, p. 11). It is a perspective able to guide action in society and in every area of human activity, and which is based on an awareness that the oppression and inferiorization of women, the exploitation of their work, of nature, and of peoples in the global south are the pretexts for the effective operation of the growth paradigm, that “atrocious icon of masculinity created by developmentalists” (Birkeland 1993, p. 23).

In recent years, attention has thus turned to the continuous worsening of women’s living conditions in the context of globalisation, which constantly creates new

disparities, deepens the old ones, consumes and kills life at ever-increasing speed (Eaton-Lorentzen 2003; Salleh 2009) and presents new challenges for ecofeminism.

In the process of production and consumption, we are all implicated in environmental destruction, in death and in war. “The relationships between nature, work and capital are some of the areas of the social organisation of human existence whereby violence, including the most extreme form – the power to kill – is sustained and constantly reproduced (Charkiewicz 2009, p. 67).

The desire to avoid any such complicity has lent great impetus to the critique of the unlimited growth paradigm, inspired by the philosophy that has guided the struggles of women in the global south. In all those countries, in fact, women unquestionably play the leading role in movements to defend land and forests from destruction and privatisation. By planting trees, preserving seeds and occupying uncultivated land, they assert the principle of food sovereignty, create new economies based on a non-competitive, community way of life, economies that regenerate ecological processes and stimulate creativity, solidarity and social cooperation.

Over recent years, the West has also seen a new orientation that has led to the creation of alternative local economies, to the formation of communities that reflect the centrality of domestic life, based on the subsistence ethic, whereby work has no aim beyond the immediate production of life, whereby people learn to live in a different temporal dimension, that of biological time, which is women’s time when they carry out the task of caring. Only a different perception of time, work and economics will make it possible to surmount sexual divisions in the workplace. Only a new perception of work, understood as the way in which a society relates to nature, can remove the mystique surrounding the notion that people can reproduce their own existence through paid work. Life reproduces itself, not in an exchange with capital, but with nature. The activity linked to the task of producing and preserving life has recently been depicted, in an influential essay by the Finnish economist Hilkka Pietilä, as the heart of the economics, and defined as the only “free economy”. The greater the distance from that centre, the greater the instability, the uprooting, the individual unease, the social malaise and the environmental degradation (Pietilä 1997). In an interview with Ariel Salleh, Pietilä declared:

My rethinking of economics started with non-counted unpaid work and production in households. [...] My insight was that if one looks at the whole economy from a household point of view, it will appear very different to how it is assumed to be in mainstream economics. [...] In those days, there was a lot of discussion going on about limits to economic growth in rich countries, and my friend, Kyösti Pulliainen, had recently published the first textbook in Finnish on environmental economics. [...] We suggested, that economic growth would become unnecessary in a well-off country like Finland if we revived the basic human economy—that is, households—and became less dependent on money and consumption. With this transformation, we thought the daily well-being of people should also increase (Salleh 2005, p. 45).

Aware that patriarchy and capitalist accumulation constitute, on an international level, the ideological and structural context in which women’s reality is currently understood, the feminist vision of a new society has identified a path towards freedom in simple living, in reducing the kind of consumption that causes poverty and environmental destruction, and increases the most brutal forms of dominion over women. It is not a question of giving up, but a path towards freedom which entails

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the assertion of values that are denied by the market economy: self-sufficiency, cooperation, respect for all living beings, creativity, pleasure in work, a moral economy based upon ethical principles that surmount the current sexual division in the workplace and the violence against women that comes with it and is an integral part of the economic system.

Such a shifting of horizons cannot fail to lead to a shift in how politics is perceived. Western thought is still bound up with the traditional Greek idea of democracy: an elitist male activity, separated from the home, from the *oikos* and from everyday tasks assigned to women and slaves, a job for men at liberty in the *polis*, the home of men. That home will not alter its nature even if it is entered by a greater number of women. It is its separation from everyday life that is the problem, the conviction that the kingdom of freedom lies beyond that of necessity. Detachment from subsistence, from the reproduction of life, is the basis upon which the economy of growth has developed, a new transcendence that kills life now and transfers its false promises into the future. In contrast, a politics that holds the values of subsistence as central follows what is immanent, the real needs of real people, attributing value to all living beings and to nature, and it can only be started from the bottom (Bennholdt-Thomsen-Mies, pp. 207-226).

Democracy could then be understood as action aimed at guaranteeing the “foundations of human life”, an everyday reality comprised of caring for and protecting life, friendship, solidarity and compassion. Democracy can be imagined as a process, like that of sowing and reaping, a path whereon the road itself is the destination, like an experience, a way of life that does not fear small-scale experiment. Everything, in fact, seems individualistic, partial, small and impotent to those who understand power in old-fashioned terms, based upon dominion.

Experiencing democracy as a force that is able to break down barriers, overcome conflict, transform relationships of dominion and allow full expression to sociality, requires that men and women in Western countries understand and feel their closeness to women and small-scale producers in the global south, who wish to assert their own sovereignty over food, stop the privatisation of public spaces, create new commons, avoid the kind of consumption that contributes to the exploitation of women and maintains or promotes sexist images, and above all wish for decisive action against the dehumanisation of women and sexual enslavement.

In the final analysis, the future of a truly human community based on connection, not on separation and opposition, requires first and foremost that men, in order to preserve their own humanity and dignity, want and are able to acknowledge the values of producing and sustaining life and make them their own, to change their own way of thinking, of living both in the world and in relationships with women, that they reject violence and distance themselves from the social perception of virility as power.

Finally, it would be important for the notion of degrowth, which has actually drawn inspiration from the work of some ecofeminists and in particular Hilka Pietilä, and which has so far kept silent on the issue of gender, to reflect on the connection between economic development, exploitation and violence against women, between patriarchy and capitalism, drawing comparisons with feminist thinking on

work, economics and ethics<sup>5</sup>. Without a vision that takes gender and age into account and that gives visibility to power relationships, legal, social and economic discourse, including that of a critical nature, will inevitably perpetuate the current situation of oppression.

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<sup>5</sup> In a recent conversation with Ariel Salleh, the economist Hilka Pietilä, recalling Martinez-Alier and André Gorz's enthusiastic interest in her economic theory and in particular in her proposal to extend and revitalise the "basic human" economy – namely that which concerns the domestic sphere – claimed not to have found any subsequent feedback as regards the influence of her thought in their work. As Ariel Salleh points out, the Finnish economist's ideas have been "depoliticised", stripped of their gender-related aspect. *'We in the North are the biggest problem for the South': A Conversation with Hilka Pietilä*, 'Capitalism, Nature, Socialism', n. 2, 2006, pp. 44-61.



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