

Eco-sufficiency and Global Justice:

Women Write Political Ecology

Ariel Salleh (ed.)

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Reviewed by Joy Paton

This book comprises a diverse set of writings at the interface of political economy, ecology and feminism. It engages theory and practice, drawing inspiration from the many indigenous, peasant, worker, ecological and women's movements challenging the economic dimensions of oppression. Its engagement with the concept of 'eco-sufficiency' highlights the notion of 'provisioning' as the fundamental economic process. In doing so, the book moves beyond a concern with the appropriation of surplus labour in production to a concern with the 'embodied debt' owed to unpaid reproductive workers who generate use-values and regenerate the conditions for production (both women and men). However, it is also concerned with the injustices involved in the 'appropriation of people's livelihood resources' (p 4). The North may be pre-occupied with financial debt but, on the reckoning of this book, it owes an unsustainable 'ecological debt' to the South. A model of eco-sufficiency that permits 'local autonomy and resource sovereignty' would thereby deliver on global justice (p 8). In this sense the book is timely. As the integration of global economic processes is being associated with multiple crises – financial, ecological, and cultural – it supports a transformative agenda by 'counterbalancing deconstructive critique with reconstructive remedies' (p x).

While the 'remedies' are drawn, in part, from those people/s already practicing 'eco-sufficiency' in many parts of the world, the critique is aimed squarely at the industrialised world. However, this is not a repackaged critique of 'development orthodoxy'. It embodies a critical dialogue with the 'progressive' perspectives of ecological economics and ecological Marxism even as they, in turn, are critical of capitalist orthodoxies evident in the environmental movement. As pointed out by

Salleh, the theorisations evident in ecological economics are devoid of a socially situated subject implying an 'ideal typical and intrinsic 'human nature' is involved' (p 296). Similarly, the over-emphasis on production in Marxism neglects the reproductive dimension of domestic and subsistence activities. If gender and environment are to be more than 'add-ons to round out the pluralism of an enlightened hegemony', academic theorists in these traditions, according to Salleh, require some deep reflexive soul-searching (p 297). In fact, the book throws down the gauntlet to theorists and practitioners of political economy more generally in its challenge to transform the discipline into 'a truly global political ecology'. For Salleh, this end point would represent a political economy that has taken seriously not only class and ecology, but also gender and ethnicity. Her epistemological critique reframes political economy 'as a gender literate political ecology' in support of 'struggles for global justice' (p 21).

In addition to Ariel Salleh, a number of well known authors have contributed to the anthology, including Marilyn Waring, Susan Hawthorne, Sabine O'Hara, and Mary Mellor. It comprises a collection of 16 chapters organised around five themes: Histories; Matter; Governance; Energy; and Movement. Each of these sections highlights a matrix within which gender and/or nature have been 'left out of the equation'. Individually, the chapters provide a rich range of 'case studies' within and across the themes. There are chapters interrogating history, theory/praxis and discourse (2, 3, 4, 10, 14), but also specific topics related to (mal) development (5, 8, 9) and environmental commons (6, 7, 11, 12, 13, 15). The empirical chapters take different forms but they all reflect the issues of injustice and oppression brought forth in the 'triangulation' of economics, ecology, and feminism. The collection is 'book-ended' with introductory and concluding chapters by Salleh which serve to highlight the underlying coherence of the various contributions. These chapters - 'Ecological Debt: Embodied Debt' (1) and 'From Eco-Sufficiency to Global Justice' (16) - offer some very interesting conceptual material.

Following on from Salleh's previous work (*Ecofeminism as Politics*), her chapters introduce important new concepts and constructs for re-orienting 'human-centred study into a wider nature-oriented one'. Amongst them, the notion of 'metabolic value' is particularly salient.

We have long needed a concept that captures the ‘source and sink’ value of nature’s ‘reproductive’ and ‘regenerative’ activities. While ‘use-value’ might represent the non-market contributions to social and economic reproduction by the ‘meta-industrial class’ (predominately women), metabolic value captures more fully the ‘meta’ values and reciprocity of human-nature interactions. These alternative value constructs pave the way for understanding Salleh’s notions of embodied debt and ecological debt because living eco-sufficiently ‘preserves and generates metabolic value’ (p 6). Salleh’s analysis is grounded in a ‘phenomenology’ of labour whereby the ongoing day by day ‘experience of negotiating humanity-nature relations’ informs an embodied materialist epistemology (p 300). From this perspective, it is the North that requires ‘capacity building’ to meet the requirements of eco-sufficiency already widely practiced in the South (the latter fragile though, in the face of an expanding global economic system).

Taken as a whole, the anthology emphasises the importance of non-market ‘values’ to the functioning of the global economy, especially those generated by ‘nature’ and ‘meta-industrial labour’ – domestic and caring work in the North and South as well as peasant labour in subsistence communities. However, the book does not explore integration of the ‘marginalised’ into global capitalism – it does not seek ‘recognition’ through monetising the reproductive and regenerative ‘work’ of women and nature. Nor does it promote an essentialised ‘women are closer to nature’ perspective. It urges a reflexive ‘embodied’ materialism that understands ‘work’ and ‘labour’ in their deepest sense – as including the non-market reproductive and regenerative activities underpinning capitalist economic processes. It is necessarily therefore the ‘principle of difference rather than the principle of equality’ through which global justice is sought (p 29). In this, the collection aims to provide a common language for the separate movements working for ecological sustainability, socio-economic justice, and cultural autonomy (p 307). It is highly recommended for teachers and researchers in a variety of disciplines who are concerned with justice and sustainability in the context of global economic and ecological crises.

Joy Paton is lecturer in Political Economy at the University of Sydney

joy.paton@usyd.edu.au