Ecofeminism and ecosocialism emerged alongside each other in the latter part of the twentieth century in response to the growing global ecological challenge. While they share a common concern about environmental damage, ecosocialism and ecofeminism have tended to follow different paths. Ecosocialists have concentrated on capitalism and its destructive activities in the sphere of production, while ecofeminists have focused on what capitalism tends to ignore, the sphere of reproduction. In this, ecofeminists identify a link between the subordination and subjugation of women and environmental exploitation and damage. For socialist ecofeminists, this created a political and theoretical link between feminist, green, and socialist analysis (Mellor 1992a).

Very early on Rosemary Radford Ruether stressed the need for feminists to address wider social and ecological relations:

"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 socio-economic relations and . . . underlying values of . . . society."

(Ruether 1975, 204)

Ruether advocated a “communitarian socialism” under which women’s subordination is to be overcome by “transforming the relationship among power, work and home” (1975, 207). Women’s work would be communalized and collectivized under local communal control. All forms of production would return to the local level. Work would be craft based and non-alienating, organic and non-waste-generating: “human society . . . would be consciously integrated into its environment” (1975, 209).

In a later reflection on the development of the relationship between ecofeminism and ecosocialism, Carolyn Merchant also argued for the need to embrace all three movements:

"Socialist feminism views change as dynamic, interactive and dialectical, rather than as mechanistic, linear and incremental. . . . A socialist feminist environmental ethic
Mary Mellor

involves developing sustainable, non-dominating relations with nature and supplying all peoples with a high quality of life.

(Merchant 1990, 105)

Merchant argues that socialist feminist environmental theory would give as much emphasis to reproduction as to production. She also stressed the importance of seeing reproduction in a wider context:

Weaving together the many strands of the ecofeminist movement is the concept of reproduction construed in its broadest sense to include the continued biological and social reproduction of human life and the continuance of life on earth.

(Merchant 1992, 209)

She advocates a “radical ecology” as the basis of a socialist position in which social movements such as bioregional movements, grassroots struggles, and mainstream environmental campaigning would largely replace social class as political agents. While environmental campaigning has grown, it is arguable how far it can be seen to have achieved Merchant’s vision of replacing class politics.

Connecting the two spheres

An early theorization of the connection between the subordination of women, the degradation of nature, and capitalist economics was put forward by Maria Mies. Her book, *Patriarchy and Accumulation on a World Scale*, first published in 1986, was subtitled *Women in the International Division of Labour*. Mies, a German sociologist, drew on her years of living in India to knit together the experience of women as paid and unpaid labourers in both the North and the South. She argued that a capitalist patriarchy was condemning women to “housewifization” and thereby responsibility for the sphere of reproduction. By adopting the concept “capitalist patriarchy,” she aimed to bring together the concerns of feminism and socialism. She saw housewifization as just one aspect of a system of exploitation that embraces the low-paid or unpaid labour of women, destruction of the natural environment, and the colonization of the resources and knowledge of Indigenous peoples around the world.

Mies’s solution was for women in the North and South to realize and challenge their common subordination by the capitalist patriarchy. However, she put more responsibility on the relatively more “prosperous” Northern women to forgo voluntarily the benefits of the exploitation of the women of the South. Similarly, Mies argued that men needed to withdraw their labour from the capitalist patriarchy:

[I]n an alternative economy men have to share the responsibility for the immediate production of life . . . all work so far subsumed under the term “housework.” . . . Only by doing this life-producing and life-preserving work themselves will they be able to develop a concept of work which transcends the exploitative capitalist patriarchal concept.

(Mies 1998 [1986], 222, emphasis in original)

By situating her analysis in a global context, Mies expanded a critique of capitalism and women’s inequality to other victims of economic exploitation such as subsistence farmers, Indigenous people, and colonized people in general. In her later work, she argued that Western capitalist
consumerism should be replaced by a return to subsistence production (Bennholdt-Thomsen and Mies 1999).

The importance of integrating analysis of the two spheres was taken up by some male ecosocialists, most notably James O’Connor. Launching the journal _Capitalism Nature Socialism_ in 1988, he called for “discourses between feminism, social ecology, and Marxism” (O’Connor 1996 [1988], 5). He sought to theorize the relation between them by building on Marx to explore the “second contradiction of capital.” The first contradiction of capital is the classic Marxist analysis of the crisis of production. The second contradiction refers not to the crisis within capitalist production, but the structural conditions within which the production process exists, i.e., reproduction and the natural environment.

Ecofeminists have also adapted the Marxian framework to explore the dynamic between production and reproduction. In a debate about the relationship between ecosocialism and ecofeminism, Ariel Salleh adopted the language of Marx to explore “embodied materialism,” seeing the link between nature, women, labour, and capitalism as a deeper contradiction than that between capital and labour (Salleh 1994, 106). In an earlier work she argued that:

“caring” however despised . . . is nevertheless the kind of unpaid service/labor that women under capitalist patriarchy are required to put in. While society denigrates the worth of such work, social reproduction would not occur without it.

(Salleh et al. 1991, 134)

Salleh argued that ecosocialism without ecofeminism was incomplete and vice versa (Salleh et al. 1991, 129). It is necessary to understand the dynamics of the mode of production and the social construction of gender, which Salleh described as “reified naturalism.” She saw ecofeminism as seeking to understand how such “patriarchal gender images become enmeshed in social institutions in a hegemonic way” (Salleh et al. 1991, 130). At the same time, ecofeminists have to deal with the fact that human beings inhabit sexed bodies that are embedded in the natural world. The ideological constructs of patriarchy and capital such as “mother” nature, woman as “feminine,” and “human nature,” as well as ideas of economic value and ownership, also relate to biological and material processes. Salleh called upon socialists to:

examine the social, political and economic consequences of biological sex . . . to come to terms with the material conditions of women’s lived experience. . . . Politicians cannot thrust “the biological” aside. That is precisely what has brought Western capitalist patriarchy to its present ecological impasse.

(Salleh et al. 1991, 131)

She argued that the ecological impasse could be overcome if ecofeminists and ecosocialists joined together to dismantle “the ideological artifice which divides ‘humanity’ from ‘nature’.” This could not be achieved if ecosocialists continued to hold on to Enlightenment concepts of transcendence over “bodily embeddedness in place and in relationships” and failed to understand the “fundamental premise of ecofeminism that in patriarchal cultures, men’s assumed right to exploit nature parallels the use/s they make of women” (Salleh et al. 1991, 131).

What emerges from these early writings is a multilevel analysis that raises key themes in the relationship between production and reproduction. Salleh sees capitalism as owing a “debt” at three levels: social debt to exploited labour, embodied debt to reproductive labour, and ecological debt for damage to the natural metabolism (2009, 24).
Materialism not essentialism

Ecofeminism is always in danger of being accused of essentialism: seeing women as being “naturally” closer to nature. How ecofeminism theorizes the relationship between women and the natural world is critical if the accusation is to be rejected. If ecofeminists see the relationship as one of affinity, arguing that women as mothers and nurturers have a unique identification with the natural world, they are open to the criticism of being essentialist. As ecofeminism emerged, socialist feminists expressed alarm at what seemed to be a retrograde movement that would trap women in mothering and nurturing roles (Coote and Campbell 1982; Jackson 1995). Socialist ecofeminists countered the critique of essentialism by arguing that they were not promoting some essential ideal of women as mothers and nurturers, but the material fact of the need for humanity to confront the reality of human existence in nature (Mellor 1992b).

The ecofeminism that is compatible with a materialist ecosocialist perspective does not focus on women as such, but on the sphere of reproduction and women’s responsibility for it. That is, an analysis of the social relationship of reproduction and its categorization as “women’s work.” A materialism that is only concerned with the injustices and inequalities in the so-called “productive” process ignores its impact on the environment and the injustices and inequalities in the reproductive sphere.

Ecofeminism’s materialism stresses the immanence (embodiedness and embeddedness) of human existence. The material starting point is that humans exist as beings in a natural environment. As embodied beings, humanity cannot avoid the biological cycle of birth, maturation, and death. Human development is also embedded within a particular ecological framework. In the process, humanity acts on nature with material consequences for the ecological framework.

Ecofeminists argue that modern economies are so destructive because they have lost touch with the overall reality of human existence in nature. Economies are fundamentally gendered in a way that marginalizes the life of the body, together with the rest of nature. As a result of this gendered division of labour, activities that represent only a very partial aspect of human existence have become the driving force and focus of modern economies. Not only are economies gendered, but the relationship between humanity and nature is also gendered. Capitalism and industrialism, compounded by patriarchy, create economies that are disembedded from local communities, local environments, and the whole of human daily life and the earth’s life cycles.

Profit-based economies only want exploitable labour and take no responsibility for the rest of the human and non-human life cycle. From this perspective, the so-called wealth-creating “economy” is parasitical on the regeneration and renewal capacity of the environment, unpaid work in homes and communities mainly done by women, socially provided infrastructure and laws, and the accumulated work and knowledge of previous generations. The formal economy, particularly the profit-seeking sector, is described by materialist ecofeminists as the tip of an iceberg with the other supportive sectors lying below the surface (Bennholdt-Thomsen and Mies 1999) or as the icing on a many-layered cake (Henderson 1988).

Immanence not transcendence

Materialist ecofeminism builds on the feminist analysis of gendered work and its critique of the marginalisation and exploitation of women’s labour. Far from an essentialist view of women as “naturally” caring, reproductive work can be seen as an “imposed altruism” (Mellor 1992a, 252). As a result of the gender inequality that feminism has identified, the inconveniences of human existence as part of nature is marginalized as low-paid or unpaid “women’s work.” The link between “women’s work” and damage to the non-human environment exists in the
way these processes enable dominant groups to distance themselves from the reality of their embodiment. Those who rely on others to maintain their bodies can appear to “transcend” their material conditions. Women and other groups that carry out body work, refuse work, repair work, regeneration, restitutive health work, etc. act as a buffer between dominant elites and the conditions and limitations of their embodiment and embeddedness in the cycles of life that sustain them. However, this does not mean women and other people who do “women’s work” are essentially more rooted in nature than men; it is just that dominant men (and women) are less rooted in practice.

To put it another way, (some) men (and some women) have used their power to escape the consequences of their embodiment. As Biesecker and Hofmeister argue, if ecological sustainability is to be achieved, it is vital to look at the processes of mediation between society and nature, in particular the work of (re)productivity that would recognize that “the processes involved in the regeneration and restoration of human and non-human life are intrinsic to each and every process involving the production of goods and services” (Biesecker and Hofmeister 2010, 1707).

Materialist ecofeminism argues that the gendered nature of modern economies leads to ecological destructiveness because they have been constructed on the false basis of excluding much of the materiality of human and non-human lives (Mellor 1997). Dominant classes can behave as if human activities are without social or ecological consequences because the destruction of life cycles has no immediate consequences for them. As a result, they create socio-economic structures that do not take account of social and ecological realities. Failure to address the basic conditions of human existence leads to what Plumwood called the dangerous illusion of “mastery” of nature:

After much destruction, mastery will fail, because the master denies dependency on the sustaining other: he misunderstands the conditions of his own existence and lacks sensitivity to limits and to the ultimate points of Earthian Existence.

(Plumwood 1993, 195)

Materialist ecofeminism directly challenges the sustainability of contemporary societies and their economic structuring. This has led to the emergence of ecofeminist political economy frameworks that challenge modern economic systems.

**Ecofeminist political economy**

Ecofeminist political economy sees the assertion of a material link between “women’s work” and the natural environment as posing a challenge to the very foundation of modern economies and conventional economics. The starting point is a critique of the “externalization” of both unpaid “women’s work” and un/undervalued natural resources. That is, they are not accounted for or incorporated into economic value. In modern economies, the externalized aspects of human embodiment (“women’s work”) and human embeddedness (relying on the resilience of the natural environment) are both treated as free “goods.” As a result, the benefits of women’s unpaid work, like the cost of damage to the non-human world, are not acknowledged.

Defining an economy as activities represented by money value fails to acknowledge its true resource base and the way money value is parasitical upon sustaining systems of unpaid social labour and the natural world (Mies 1986; Salleh 2009). As a result, these are exploited and damaged. The money-framed economy can operate as it does because it can exploit the unpaid, or underpaid, caring work that is mainly done by women, together with the resources of the
natural world. This leads to an unsustainable construct, “economic man,” who appears not to be embodied or embedded (Mellor 1997). “He” operates according to financial calculation, whether as producer or consumer, worker or boss. In an economic context, “he” has no hinterland, domestic responsibilities, needs, or insecurities. “He” is not very young or very old; “he” is not sick or troubled. “He” consumes without any concern for the use or abuse of resources. “He” is gendered but not necessarily male; women participating in the formal economy also need to adopt the mantel of “economic man.”

Ecological sustainability and gender justice would mean recognizing the material structures and relationships that enable the false construct “economic man” to seemingly transcend “his” material conditions. The question then becomes how the economic marginalization of both women’s work and the sustainability of the environment are to be challenged. The challenge must be to monetary value (or rather market value) itself, with the need to identify other ways of measuring value. In a ground-breaking analysis, Marilyn Waring brought concern about unpaid labour together with a concern for the environment and wanted to allocate both a special value in national accounting (1989). She argued strongly for women’s unpaid work and the unrecognized value of the natural environment to be included in the UN System of National Accounts. However, writing in 2009, Waring saw the United Nations System of National Accounts (UNSNA) as “failing women miserably as a policy instrument” (Waring 2009, 178).

Silvia Federici has recognized that capitalist wealth relies on the primary accumulation of the unpaid work of housewives, indentured servants, and colonized peoples (Federici 2009, 57). Reproducing humanity is the most basic level of “production” on which everything else rests. Federici (2012) is optimistic about the political potential of women’s domestic role. She argues that in the most adverse of circumstances, reproductive and solidaristic work must be done if people and communities are to survive at all. Far from being neutralized by their role within families, women are organizing within and through collectives and commons. Drawing inspiration from women’s activities in social economies in the global South and North, including in urban gardening, local money systems, and credit unions, Federici sees women as key to many grassroots social movements, particularly those challenging globalization’s attack on the local commons. However, she argues that there is still need for a collective struggle over social reproduction even as cooperative and collective approaches to reproductive work are creating space for experimenting with new ways to restructure human relationships.

**Challenging capitalism**

The contribution of ecofeminism to ecosocialism is to see the sphere of reproduction as mounting a direct challenge to capitalism. Echoing the work of Maria Mies, many ecofeminists see a resistance to globalized capitalism in the campaigns of women, peasants, and Indigenous people to preserve local economies and common resources. As Leigh Brownhill and Terisa E. Turner argue, the prominence of women in defending the commons against commodification has been evident in Africa for many decades:

> African women have faced and resisted enclosure of their commons and collectively maintained indigenous knowledge, seed, practices, food production, and energy technologies that offer clear alternatives to oil and petro-chemical reliant food and energy systems.

*(Brownhill and Turner 2019, 1)*
They define ecofeminist ecosocialism as “a global, horizontal, subsistence-oriented, decolonized commoning political economy” (Brownhill and Turner 2019, 5). It is a politics of resistance against a neoliberal corporate globalization that exploits women, Indigenous and colonized people, and nature. It seeks to defend the commons against commodification through building economies based on self-provisioning, revitalization of subsistence systems, and local production and distribution.

The concepts of the commons and provisioning are important for ecofeminists. Seeing the environment as a commons is in opposition to its privatization and commodification. Provisioning is a challenge to the separation of the two spheres of production and reproduction and the conventional notion of an economy (Mellor 2016). Feminist economists use the concept of provisioning to dramatically expand the means of human sustenance. Provisioning embraces both paid and unpaid work covering the full range of activities, from love and care to food, shelter, and social and leisure activities. The concept also opens up the distinction between wants and needs and helps focus economic decision-making on the needs of human beings in all aspects of their lives. In meeting human needs, the environment is also seen as a provisioning system with the need to achieve a balance between human needs, the needs of other species, and the need of the environment to reprovision itself.

**Why ecosocialism must be ecofeminist**

There is a danger that ecosocialism without ecofeminism will assume that getting off the treadmill of productivism and consumerism will enable realization of Marx’s “kingdom of freedom” (Löwy 2018). That abolishing exploitative labour and profit seeking will open up an era of choice and fulfilment in harmony with nature. The lesson from ecofeminism is that while it is possible to abandon the socially constructed sphere of production, it is not possible to abolish the labour required in the sphere of reproduction. Marx famously foresaw an era when it would be possible to hunt in the morning, fish in the afternoon, and be a critic after dinner. There is no mention of who cooks the dinner.

If ecosocialists are to absorb the insights of ecofeminism, they must pay attention to the relationship between the sphere of production and the sphere of reproduction. It is at least theoretically possible to deconstruct socially constructed systems such as capitalism or industrialization, but it is not possible to deconstruct the realities of human existence as beings in nature. Humans exist in biological time. They are born, grow/learn, and die. They must eat and drink, keep warm. They need help if sick or infirm. The environment also has its time scale and needs. It needs time to grow, regenerate, react. It may be possible to abolish or minimize production, but it is impossible to ignore reproduction if humanity is to survive.

An ecofeminist ecosocialist “provisioning” economy would start from a commitment to social justice and human well-being as well as the sustainability of the natural world. Patterns of work and consumption would be sensitive to the human life cycle and the replenishing needs of the planet. Provisioning of necessary goods and services would be the main focus of the economy, and the activities of production and exchange would be fully integrated with the dynamics of the body and the environment. Socialists have followed Marx in looking at a politics around a struggle over the means of production. Socialist ecofeminism makes the case for a politics around the means of sustenance: socially just and ecologically sustainable provisioning. This would embrace the right to life and flourishing not only for humans but also for the rest of nature.

There is no “natural” way for humanity to live within its environment. Ecofeminist ecosocialism is about analyzing the sources of inequality and ecological destruction and looking for
new ways of living that would enable people to control democratically their means of sustenance in a way that minimizes human impact on the natural world and enables individuals to flourish in peace.

References


