Approaches in Environmentalism and Feminism

by Jacqueline Pearce *

There is a global crisis. It manifests itself in war, in poverty and social injustices, in rape, in violence against children, and in the assault on nature. There are those who interpret all these problems as unrelated and temporary, and there are those who consider these problems, not as separate, but as the result of one single crisis of worldview, or world/self-consciousness. Environmentalists and feminists are two groups which have emerged in reaction to the crises of our time. While their initial concerns may have been quite separate, today the two focuses are beginning to come together as the interconnection of global problems is revealed.

Labels such as "environmentalism" and "feminism" tend to obscure the varieties of opinion which fall under each heading, and to imply only one definition. However, both feminism and environmentalism include a spectrum of proponents ranging from conservative to transformative. In this paper I would like to outline some general categories which I hope will help illuminate the various approaches within environmentalism and feminism. These are: maintainer, reformer, radical and visionary.[1] I call them "approaches" because they are ways of approaching the world (society and nature). It is my feeling that, while feminism and environmentalism originate from different concerns, at the transformation oriented end of the two spectrums the concerns and analysis of both begin to intersect. Their difference is in emphasis and terminology rather than substance.

In general, the maintainer approach falls outside of feminism and environmentalism. However, a recognition of the existence of the maintainer category is useful in helping set the other approaches in context. Maintainers see the world as set. They tend to cling on to the way things are, desiring to maintain rather than change things. They view any problems which arise in society, or which are caused by our society (that is, Western society), as superficial, temporary, and solvable through economics or technological application. Maintainers may at times use language which seems to imply a desire for change, but when they talk of "progress" and "development" they refer only to the spreading or escalation of the current way of doing things.

The reformers' approach to the world and problems within it is the least threatening to maintainers. By concentrating on individual issues and problems, reformers tinker with parts of the system, but leave the system (the way of things supported by the maintainer) intact. Reformers generally feel that problems or crises can be curbed through the regulation of behaviour, and that change can come about within the system, or within "the way things are."

Radicals feel there is a problem with the current way things are that mere reforms can't alter. They wish to overthrow the structures of society, and to change or replace the whole system. There is a danger in the radicals' approach in that it can lead to the substitution of one structure for another without any real change to the patterns of behavior and interaction. It is easy for the maintainer to turn general opinion against the radical by raising fear that the radical threatens society's cherished values and current way of life.

Visionaries[2] are perhaps the most threatening to maintainers because they attempt to transform those very values which the maintainers use as their defense. The visionary approach focuses on what it sees as the core or nerve centre of society, the mythology, values and self-understanding of the society, which are usually safely insulated from the effects of any tinkering or altering done to the society's structural manifestations. The visionary emphasizes the need for a change in culture and consciousness, feeling that any revolutionary changes in the behaviour and structure of society must evolve from this core. The visionary is inspired by long-term and utopian vision.

These four categories I have just described are a simplistic division of possible approaches, and are not without overlap. A maintainer, for example, may appear to welcome

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reforms in order to deflect attention, consciously or not, from the assumptions about the world that he/she clings to. A visionary on the other hand, may act out of the space of the reformer or radical because his/her personal vision is difficult to communicate, because of pressure to "act," or because results of a kind may be more recognizably and quickly seen in response to reforms.

Environmentalists are concerned with the way we, as a society, treat the natural environment. Even within this central concern there are a variety of approaches, and a variety of ways "environment" is understood and related to. The maintainer, for example, views nature as a collection of resources with varying degrees of potential for human use. Resources, whether minerals, animals, plants or "scenic" areas, are considered to be objects which are, for all intents and purposes, devoid of life. Humans, if considered a part of nature at all, are considered, by virtue of their rationality, to be superior and in control. Our current industry and economy depends on the maintenance of this view of nature.

Many environmentalists' arguments in defense of nature fall within the maintainer view, even though their sentiments may not. The terms "environment" and "environmentalist" are themselves products of the view which sees nature as external to humans. The resource conservation standpoint, for example, does not criticize society's way of thinking about nature or of doing things, it merely asks us to do things a bit more carefully, to "use" nature more "wisely" and with some thought for the availability of natural "resources" into the future. The typical reform-oriented environmentalist (environmentalists most visible in the media) attacks environmental problems piecemeal, focusing on individual issues rather than on common roots or deeper connections between the issues. This type of environmentalist tends to seek quick reforms (which, while urgently needed, may turn out to be stop gaps only).

In general the radical environmentalist category refers to those individuals or groups who claim that a switch in political ideology, or in the structuring of society, is what is needed to curtail environmental degradation. Marxists, for example, call for a redistribution of resources and a halt to their use for capitalist profit. However, this restructuring does not attempt to alter the maintainer's definition of nature as object. There are also a number of environmental groups, such as Greenpeace and Earth First!, who have been labeled "radical." However, this label is based more on the actions of the groups than on any overall plan they might have to restructure society. These groups practice direct action in an attempt to prevent specific activities such as whaling or the cutting of forests. The results are immediate and usually media catching, but are not necessarily long-term.

Visionaries see a link between how we conceive of nature and how we act. If we are able to define nature as "other" (which the word "environment" implies), then we will not be able to recognize our place within nature. Visionaries criticize the dominant worldview (that held by the maintainer) for its tendency to dichotomize (for example, to separate mind from body, intellect from intuition, culture from nature) and to assume one must be better than the other. Visionaries seek alternatives to hierarchical thinking through the validation of, for example, both intuition and reason, use-value and intrinsic value, action and vision. Visionaries wish to re-subjectify nature, and to make valid non-utilitarian arguments for the preservation of nature. They seek to challenge and transform the very conception of what it means to be human and what it means to be nature.

To summarize the three general environmental approaches, reform environmentalists concentrate on being more careful with resources, radicals concentrate on restructuring control and distribution of resources, and visionaries focus on altering the definition of nature so that "resources" no longer exist. The first focuses on changing behaviour, the second on restructuring the society in which behaviour occurs, and the third on transforming the consciousness from which behaviour flows.

While feminism in general does not specifically include the natural environment in its sphere of concern, many feminists have begun to include a concern for nature, and for connected issues such as peace and nuclear disarmament, into their analyses and focuses. In Western society women have traditionally been associated with nature, a devalued nature which is considered separate and inferior to the world of men and culture/intellect. Feminists are reacting to this association, as well as to environmental degradation, when they bring environmental concerns into feminism. Reaction may take a variety of forms.

Some feminists, who may be considered reformers, react to the women-nature connection

by attempting to sever women's association with nature and to join with male culture in its position over nature. This feminist perspective seeks to "better" women's position (or at least that of some women), but offers no more than superficial criticism of the "way things are." It simply calls for greater mobility of women within the hierarchy of the system, but does not at all call for a different kind of system (it questions neither the structures of society or the worldview).

Radical feminists such as Marxist feminists and socialist feminists have more extensive analyses, but generally do not incorporate the dominant conception of nature into their critiques. They seek to sever the connection of women with nature, recognizing it as socially constructed, but for the most part, they do not question the socially constructed nature-culture dualism. Marxist feminists, for example, associate themselves with male workers in an attempt to overthrow capitalism. They feel that problems will be alleviated once the capitalist system is replaced, but do not question the conception of nature as a resource which can be utilized to meet the material needs of humans. Some Marxist feminists have suggested that by associating nature with the oppressed class of workers, it too might be incorporated into the concerns of Marxists. Again, this assumes that altering of structures will alter relationships, but does not address the conceptual assumptions which influence relationships.

Another radical approach within feminism is a branch which is referred to specifically as "radical feminism." It roots women's oppression in reproductive biology and in male-control of women's fertility and sexuality, and believes women will be free only when they are "no longer bound by the constraints of compulsory heterosexuality and compulsory child-bearing and child-rearing roles".[3] Some radical feminists seek to emphasize women's association with nature rather than to sever it. These feminists see women's connection to nature as feeding into a separate "women's culture." They desire, not to gain a higher place in patriarchal society, but to separate from patriarchal society or to supplant patriarchy with a more matriarchal society based on values deemed already present in "women's culture." The "radical feminist" approach differs from the Marxist approaches in that, not only does it focus on changing the organization and structure of society, it often attempts to integrate alternative modes of knowing and being, such as women's mystical, intuitive or spiritual experiences and a celebration of the female body, into feminist theory and epistemology. In this respect it resembles the focus of the visionary. Although this type of radical feminism may wish to alter society's value and consciousness of nature and women, it tends to confirm or even exaggerate the dualistic conception of women and men as essentially different and separate. For this reason I have associated it with the general radical category rather than with the visionary, although it obviously has visionary elements.

Visionary feminism entails addressing the link between women's oppression and the oppression of nature, and the interconnections between all forms of oppression. While recognizing the structural forms oppression takes, it focuses on the conceptual basis. In other words, it seeks a transformation of the consciousness of both men and women so that the current structures and behaviours no longer have any foundation from which to stand. It seeks to reconceptualize what it means to be human, what it means to be man or woman, and what it means to live and interact on this earth. The visionary approach requires a new human vision of being and relationship which does not dichotomize or limit possibilities. The visionary feminist seems to be particularly sensitive to the need to address the current disjuncture between action and theory in order to form an approach to social change that is rooted in both.

While the reformer, radical and visionary may all have a role to play in bringing about needed change, it is the visionary that is most often neglected or maligned by the other groups, and marginalized by society in general. Much of the recent debate within environmental thought has focused on internal name calling and rivalry.[4] While recognizing the variety of focuses within environmentalism and attempting to break the general stereotype of "environmentalist," I also feel it is a mistake for different interests within environmentalism to alienate themselves from each other by emphasizing differences rather than commonalities. I feel that visionary feminism and visionary environmentalism, for example, have much in common, and can gain strength in relationship.

Both visionary feminism and visionary environmentalism developed in response to what they saw as lacking in feminism and in environmentalism. Within the broad environmentalist group, individuals began to criticize the tendency for environmental problems to be discussed in the utilitarian terms of the maintainers and to be treated as separate unrelated

issues. Many of these people felt a conflict between their own non-utilitarian love for nature and the approach they felt compelled to take as environmentalists attempting to bring environmental problems to the attention of the public and legal system. In 1973 Norwegian philosopher Arne Naess coined the terms "shallow ecology" and "deep ecology" to describe the reform oriented approach common to environmentalists and a deeper or spiritual oriented approach which developed from a sensitivity to the relationship between human and nonhuman life.

Deep ecology can be broadly defined to include all those individuals engaged in deeply questioning cultural assumptions about nature and the place of humans in nature.[5] Many deep ecologists are inspired by a personal experience of nature (especially wild nature) which leads them to intuit or sense that all components of nature have intrinsic value and that each depends, both physically and "spiritually," on its connection to the whole. Deep ecologists question the cultural assumption that human beings are superior to other components of nature, and that humans can and should control nature. In attempting to free themselves from this cultural baggage, they look to the above personal experience as a more valid informant about human-nature relationships (this validation of personal experience is similar to feminist reclamation of women's personal experience as knowledge source).

The basic difference between the deep ecological approach and the ecological feminist approach is that deep ecologists speak of anthropocentrism (human-centredness) as the root of our culture's destructive relationship with nature, while ecofeminists speak of androcentrism (male-centredness) as the root. This critical focus on anthropocentrism also differentiates deep ecologists from other visionaries, such as social ecologists who do not necessarily question the notion of human significance.[6] Deep ecologists advocate biocentrism, or life-centredness, rather than human-centredness, claiming that all organisms and entities are equal in intrinsic worth and have an equal right to grow and unfold within the pattern of the whole. In suggesting that human beings are not superior or more significant, the intention of deep ecologists is not to devalue human life, but to resacrilize all of nature.

Deep ecology draws from a variety of disciplines, including ecology, psychology, history and philosophy, and the traditions of Christianity, Taoism, Buddhism, and Native Indian spirituality. It considers itself to be more an approach than an ideology, seeking to facilitate the process of questioning and of stretching perceptions, rather than attempting to articulate a specific platform. Deep ecology is then, not a fixed theory or static set of ideas, and may be described with some variation from person to person. It is described by George Sessions and Arne Naess as based on the following principles:

1. *The well-being and flourishing of human and nonhuman Life on Earth have value in themselves (synonyms: intrinsic value, inherent value). These values are independent of the usefulness of the nonhuman world for human purposes.*

2. *Richness and diversity of life forms contribute to the realization of these values and are also values in themselves.*

3. *Humans have no right to reduce this richness and diversity except to satisfy* ***vital*** *needs.*

4. *The flourishing of human life and cultures is compatible with a substantial decrease of the human population. The flourishing of nonhuman life requires such a decrease.*

5. *Present human interference with the nonhuman world is excessive, and the situation is rapidly worsening.*

6. *Policies must therefore be changed. These policies affect basic economic, technological, and ideological structures. The resulting state of affairs will be deeply different from the present.*

7. *The ideological change is mainly that of appreciating* ***life quality*** *(dwelling in situations of inherent value) rather than adhering to an increasingly higher standard of living. There will be profound awareness of the difference between big and great.*

8. *Those who subscribe to the foregoing points have an obligation directly or indirectly to try to implement the necessary changes.*[7]

These statements are intended not as dogma, but as suggestions which each individual can interpret, qualify, and elaborate in his/her own way.

To summarize, visionary environmentalists criticize the dominant worldview's em-

phasis on individualism, independence, competitiveness, rationalism, centralization, homogenization, and material consumption. They seek to reclaim values such as interdependence, cooperation, caring, intuition, decentralization, diversity, and simplicity of material wants, and to expand our concept of community to include the nonhuman. They are guided by a utopian vision of a transformed society, yet recognize that such a vision is important, not as an end to be reached, but as a transforming tool. The term "visionary" encompasses both interior and exterior vision, recognizing that there are many ways of "seeing" and knowing. Ideally, the visionary attempts to reevaluate and reawaken possibilities of understanding and consciousness that have been suppressed or unrealized, and does not attempt to suggest that there is one "right way."

Although I have used deep ecology here to represent the visionary environmentalist category, I in no way wish to suggest that the category is limited to deep ecology. In general, the term "visionary environmentalist" refers to those individuals who base their work on the intuition of interrelatedness between human and nonhuman components of the global ecosystem, and who look to the cultural obscuring and distorting of this relation as the source of crisis.

Visionary feminists have a similar focus, but their approach is from the perspective of feminist analysis, which is deeply concerned with the oppression of women and with the exclusion of women from stories about the world. These feminists have also been called "eco-feminists," as their concerns incorporate the ecosystem. However, not all eco-feminists can be considered visionary, as I have attempted to show in my discussion of the various responses to the woman-nature connection.

Karen Warren's description of what she calls "transformative feminism" articulates much of what I mean by visionary feminism. She criticizes the four leading versions of feminism, "liberal feminism, traditional Marxist feminism, radical feminism, and socialist feminism," and calls for an ecological feminism which expands upon the "traditional conception of feminism as 'the movement to end women's oppression' by recognizing and making explicit the interconnections between all systems of oppression."[8] Drawing from Warren's definition and from Ynestra King's description of eco-feminism[9] I have outlined what seem to be the main principles of a visionary feminism:

1) The domination of nature and the domination of sex, race and class are intimately connected and mutually reinforcing. The liberation of women requires the elimination of all systems of oppression.

2) Reality is socially constructed. Hierarchy is a social construction projected onto nature and used to justify domination. Life on earth is an interconnected web, not a hierarchy.

3) Although the women-nature connection is a social construction it may be used as a vantage point for creating a different kind of culture which transcends the nature-culture distinction, and which draws from so-called "female" values and ethics (caring, nurturing, reciprocity, community, etc.).

4) While, as a subordinate group, women's experiences and ways of knowing may differ from mens', those experiences are themselves diverse and varied. We need to recognize common interests, and to celebrate and provide room for diversity (in natural and social systems).

5) We need to rethink what it means to be human from a non-patriarchal framework, recognizing interconnections between human and nonhuman nature. This would involve a "psychological restructuring of our attitudes and beliefs about ourselves and 'our world' (including nonhuman world) and a philosophical rethinking of the notion of self such that we see ourselves as both co-members of an ecological community and yet different from other members of it."[10]

6) Transformation on a personal level

requires a corresponding restructuring of social relations, economic and political structures, and science and technologies, according to principles of care and reciprocity rather than of individualism and control.

These characteristics of visionary feminism, while worded differently, correspond in many ways to the characteristics of visionary environmentalism. Both are based on a recognition of interconnection, diversity, and of the need to transform our consciousness, institutions and technology to reflect this recognition. Both understand the current escalation of environmental and social injustices as rising from the Western cultural construction of reality, and as reversible only through the deconstruction of that reality in order that new possibilities are revealed.

The visionary is often dismissed as utopian or impractical because he/she strives for a reality different from the present. The visionary may be criticized for not being adequately "political" or action-oriented because she/he sees significant social change as arising slowly out of a transformation of individual and cultural consciousness. However, action for the visionary, can occur on many levels: on a personal level of inner growth and exploration, on the level of ideas and intellectual argument, on the level of lifestyle and relationships, on the level of political activism, and on the level of myth-making, ritual and art. The visionary agrees that we need to deal with issues now, but says this is not enough. Until we transform our very way of thinking and relating to the world, the rape, destruction and exploitive manipulation of life will continue.

When I speak of transforming consciousness it seems very abstract and amorphous because it points to a way of being that is not yet fully visualized or understood. Once possibilities become known and familiar they gain solidity and reality. The ideas of the visionary may seem unrealistic and incomprehensible now, because they have been excluded from the maintainer's (dominant society's) repertoire of possibilities. The transforming of consciousness requires a recognition of the limitation of one's repertoire so that what lies outside these limitations can be glimpsed. The visionary's task is to deconstruct the dominant western version of reality so that its foundations and limitations can be determined and revealed, and to open new ground (through the encouragement of wonder, and the opening to ever broadening possibilities of experience and relationship) so that the seeds of a new reality can be planted. For the visionary, it is only through such exercises that the global crisis can be recognized for what it is and the possibilities of hope glimpsed.

Notes

1. These categories were inspired by a set of categories developed by Steve Kline to describe environmentalists (activist, radical, visionary) and by dian marino to describe social change (maintenance, reform, structural). Kline and marino are Professors at the Faculty of Environmental Studies, York University, North York, Ont.

2. I use the term "visionary" to give a sense of a broad, overarching perspective, rather than a narrowly focused perspective. The transformation orientation differentiates the visionary approach I describe from the more general use of the term "visionary." I considered using the term "transformative' instead of "visionary" in order to avoid any association of "vision" with sight dominance, but I felt "visionary" was a word with more resonations. For me, the word "vision" takes on a metaphorical quality which evokes an inner sense which is informed by more than sight or visualization

3. Karen Warren, "Feminism and Ecology: Making Connections," **Environmental Ethics**, 9:1 (1987), p.14.

4. See Murray Bookchin, "Social Ecology vs Deep Ecology" and Janet Biehl, "It's Deep, But is it Broad? An Eco-feminist Looks at Deep Ecology," **Kick It Over**, July 1988. These articles, while bringing up some important points, are written in a combative tone, dismissing deep ecology because of statements made primarily by Dave Foreman, founder of the activist-oriented environmental organization Earth First! While criticizing comments made by Foreman is justified, it is inaccurate to suggest that his personal opinion represents deep ecology as a whole, or even Earth First! as a whole. For a responsible comment on the deep ecology/eco-feminism/social ecology debate see Warwick Fox, "The Deep Ecology/Eco-feminism Debate and its Parallels," **Environmental Ethics**, 11 (1989).

5. This broad use of the term deep ecology includes many individuals who do not call themselves "deep ecologists" and who, in fact, prefer to steer away from the label for various reasons. John Livingston and Neil Evernden are Canadian examples. See Livingston, **The Fallacy of Wildlife Conservation** (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1981), Evernden, **The Natural Alien** (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1985), and other writings by Evernden and Livingston.

6. Social ecology is a visionary approach with roots in Marxism and anarchism. Although social ecology attempts to dissolve the hierarchical model of nature in which humans dominate, Murray Bookchin's writings imply that humans are the most significant species by virtue of their self-consciousness. For an elaboration of social ecology see **The Ecology of Freedom** (Palo Alto: Cheshire Books, 1982) and other writings by Murray Bookchin.

7. Bill Devall and George Sessions, **Deep Ecology** (Salt Lake City: Peregrine Smith, 1985), p.70 (principles recorded in April 1984).

8. Warren, p.18

9. Ynestra King, "The Ecology of Feminism and the Feminism of Ecology," Harbinger: **The Journal of** Social Ecology, vol. 1 (1983), pp. 16-22.

10. Warren, p.19.