

Ecofeminism Revisited – in Dialogue with Sherilyn MacGregor

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FZG: In the German debate, ecofeminism is quite a contested concept. This is because it is often associated with naturalization or essentialism. We would like to know why you find the term or idea of ecofeminism attractive. Why do you work with it?

MacGregor: My academic work for over twenty years has been critically engaged with ecofeminism as a political theory. I started out being a critic of the extent to which some ecofeminisms were grounded in a kind of 'unique feminine experience', often connected to motherhood. I was critical of the trend at the time, which was the late 1990s and early 2000s, to use motherhood and maternalism as a basis of authority for political action on the environment. Some made the claim that women care about the earth because they are mothers and perform the work of mothering. I saw that claim as a form of sociological essentialism, connected to, but slightly different from, biological essentialism. So, I developed an ecofeminist theoretical critique of 'eco-maternalism' as a political strategy, arguing that it ultimately runs counter to feminist goals and hinders rather than enables equal citizenship.

But this was an imminent critique: I didn't want to throw the baby out with the bathwater. Another strand in my work has been to defend ecofeminism from unfair caricatures. The main caricature is that all of ecofeminism is essentialist, which is not true. This claim has been used to blunt the edges of ecofeminism and to make it less promising politically than it could and should be. Some who have made that claim have used a very narrow strand of literature to caricature ecofeminism as being about women's unique, natural connection to the earth. We can't deny that some people who have called themselves ecofeminists, primarily early activists, have used those arguments. However, it would be unfair to ignore all of the other intellectual work that has been done, work that is not anchored in an essential relationship, but on the contrary, has strenuously criticized essentialism. This has always been about a political argument for the thoroughly compatible agendas of gender equality and environmental sustainability and seeing connections at many different levels between those two political agendas. I still hear people dismissing ecofeminism on account of very outdated ideas. It makes me think many people haven't bothered to read anything beyond the early 2000s, which is lazy on their part and most unfortunate, because the promise of ecofeminism thus remains underappreciated.

Moving on to the question of why I use ecofeminism in my work. I've used it because I've always been interested in challenging the political, economic and social structures that drive inequalities and injustices, in terms of material well-being, in terms of political