remains primarily with 'legal' debates. Further, Frug relies almost exclusively in making her points on understandings of debates within United States feminism and on issues on the current American feminist agenda including African-American feminist debate around rap lyrics, interpretations of constitutional protections to equality and free speech, and the case-method style of legal education. Having said this, however, in the section of the book entitled 'Re-reading Contracts: A Feminist Analysis of a Contracts Casebook', we see Frug's meticulous and often inspired exploration of gender-related ideas in contract law, and how they can be used to challenge gender constraints and generate re-readings of other, indeed, potentially all texts.

Thus, while Frug brilliantly raises important questions, she does not, nor does she intend to, provide answers, and ultimately my mixed feelings about the political significance of postmodern theory are not fully resolved. One of the comments

on the back cover of this book, however, states that after reading it we will never think about the debates over pornography, prostitution, 'women's difference' or deconstruction the same way (Martha Minow, Harvard Law School). I agree. Whether one embraces wholeheartedly a postmodern approach to legal feminism or not, this book surely inspires thought and is an important contribution to legal and feminist scholarship.

Alison Diduck

Note

- 1 See Rhode (1990), where she illuminates this difference between feminist theory and critical legal studies.

Reference

- RHODE, Deborah (1990) 'Feminist critical theories' *Stanford Law Review* Vol. 42: 617-38.

Women, the Environment and Sustainable Development: Towards a Theoretical Synthesis

Rosi Braidotti, Ewa Charkiewicz, Sabine Hausler and Saskia Wieringa

*Zed Books in association with
INSTRAW: London and New Jersey,
1994*

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The Power to Change: Women in the Third World Redefine their Environment

Edited by the Women's Service
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Two years after UNCED (United Nations Conference on Environment and Development) and with growing academic and policy attention on women's relationships with the environment, these two important books offer timely opportunities for synthesis and reflection. At first sight they are very different. Braidotti *et al.*'s is by four European feminist academics, strongly intellectual in tone and theoretical in orientation. It aims to provide a state-of-the-art review of debates on women, the environment and sustainable development, linking theory to epistemology and policy, and steps towards an alternative framework. By contrast, *The Power to Change* is by women from the South, and journalistic in focus. Centring on a compilation of fifty

recent articles by female journalists in Africa, Asia and Latin America, it describes women and communities engaging in practical environmental struggles. But beneath the differences lie solid areas of common ground. Both books see the subordination of women and of environmental concerns as linked to multiple crises in dominant models of development. In challenging these, the Women's Feature Service book helps illustrate the kind of political strategy which Braidotti *et al.* suggest.

Braidotti *et al.*'s book represents a serious, and to date unprecedented, attempt to untangle a complexity of positions and perspectives all too often confused in policy discussions. As such it will be immensely useful to students, researchers and practitioners alike. The book traces the emergence of two sets of responses to perceived connexions between the domination of nature and the subordination of women; 'Women, Environment and Development' (WED) strategies in development agencies and the South, and ecofeminism, as elaborated among Northern feminists and academics. Ideas in both contributed to the Women's Action Agenda 21 at UNCED, which appeared to represent a united global sisterhood emphasizing women's 'special' relationship to nature, giving them a 'special' role in solving the planet's environmental crisis.

In rendering explicit theoretical and epistemological questions informing this position, and exploring other fields of feminist, environmentalist and development knowledge which speak to it, the authors reveal it as problematic and contradictory. They challenge dominant development models and the science informing them, for example through feminist epistemologies and critiques of science, postcolonial and Black feminist theory, and strands of environmental thinking including deep and social ecology. Equally, they criticize reformist approaches to sustainable development, which

paradoxically allocate roles in solving the environmental crisis to the same economic and political structures which produced it. But radical alternatives emphasizing a woman-nature connexion also embody different and conflicting positions. The book explores heated debates within feminism concerning women and nature, essentialism and constructivism. It shows how WED debates have variously depicted women's environmental relationship as choiceless crisis victim, privileged environmental nurturer, economic manager, or dynamically conditioned by gender relations in resource access and use. Useful discussions of ecofeminism expose the dissolution of early theoretical promise into contradiction, and strongly criticize 'cultural' ecofeminism – the strand most influencing WED debates – for ignoring differences among women, as related for example to race and class.

Braidotti *et al.* emphasize the political potential of unitary visions such as at UNCED, but also their dangers; not only of obscuring differences between women, but also of reproducing prevailing structures of omission, objectification and hierarchy: for example in idealizing the 'poor third world woman' as the source of alternative development vision. Instead, they draw on the work of Donna Haraway and Black feminist theorists to argue for a post-modern materialist perspective based on people's critical analysis of their particular positions in wider power structures. This 'situating of oneself' becomes a basis for a political strategy of temporary and mobile coalitions around specific issues, cross-cutting divides of institution, ideology and gender. It is from this perspective that alternative cultural conceptions of progress, locally sustainable lifestyles, participatory democracy and the recovery of dominated people's subjugated knowledges are seen as essential components of sustainable development in both North and South.

These convincing arguments are

made more so by the authors' sympathetic revealing of their personal disciplines, standpoints and politics. This helps compensate for a certain abstraction and dryness in presentation, but more examples would have helped. The separate authorship of different chapters has also led to some repetitiveness and structural incoherence, at times obscuring the clarity of the argument.

Abstraction is certainly not a problem in the case-study-focused Women's Feature Service book. The introduction explains the aims of bringing a gender perspective and Southern groups' priority issues to environment and development discussions. Evocatively describing crises engendered by international development, it sees emerging from them a climate of struggle and documents women and communities taking control over environmental issues, often challenging the status quo.

The set of short features serve to illustrate Braidotti *et al.*'s coalitions in action. In many, women are acting as a group; whether finding technical solutions to peri-urban deforestation and soil erosion in war-torn Mozambique, or agitating against the destruction of traditional salt industries by multinationals in Colombia. But there are also place-based, cross-gender coalitions, for example against industrial-pollution hazards and large dams in India, and cross-institutional ones, as exemplified in the uniting of a professional lawyer with shifting cultivators to oppose logging practices in the Philippines, or female technology entrepreneurs' work with the support of sympathetic Non-Governmental Organizations.

Engagingly written, the studies cover not only well-documented cases – such as Kenya's Greenbelt movement – but also some fascinating lesser known ones: the Zambian woman who built an 'appropriate technology' incubator from local materials, for example, or the role of insects in local diets and environmental sustainability. While many

of these are local struggles, careful attention is given to showing the regional and often global processes engendering them, whether involving militarism, debt or transnational corporations. This illustration of struggle over ecological processes and resources – both at micro and macro levels – is important and useful, showing in action the gendered political economy of environment and development which Braidotti *et al.*'s book only alludes to. Important, too, is the deconstruction of 'environment' into specific, differentially valued and often contested features; a perspective often absent in Braidotti's book which often speaks uncritically of 'nature' and of 'pro-environmental change'.

While there is much diversity here, there are also common themes which regional overviews of Africa, Asia and Latin America attempt to bring together. These are the least satisfying parts of the book, tending to lapse into the kind of generalization about 'women' which the cases themselves avoid, and which Braidotti *et al.*, warn against. The book is also unsatisfactory in its treatment of 'science'. A number of cases focus on women's struggles for recognition by technical extension services. But there is very little about indigenous knowledges, concepts and solutions based on them, which research elsewhere now shows to be so significant. The book's claim to illustrate 'lived understandings' of environment and development issues thus begs the question of their basis in anything but Western scientific rationalities. While this may reflect the journalists' own formally educated, scientifically informed positions Braidotti *et al.*'s analysis shows the importance of making these explicit, and why a grass-roots focus does not necessarily avoid problems of objectification and power in representing others' views and voices.

Melissa Leach