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beyond mothering earth: ecological citizenship and the politics of care

Sherilyn MacGregor; UBC Press, Vancouver, Canada, 2007, 296pp., ISBN: 978-0-7748-1202-3, \$29.95 (pbk)

Although not expressed as such, this book is predicated on the inability of two of the most significant social movements of the late twentieth century – feminism and environmentalism – to engage meaningfully with each other. Drawing on Chantal Mouffe’s assertion that ‘citizenship is an articulating principle for many social movements’ (p. 235), Sherilyn MacGregor argues that this needs to animate an ecofeminism movement, which, to date, has neglected citizenship in favour of an emphasis on ‘care’.

This is a rich, detailed and scholarly consideration of ecological feminism, which combines a critical reading of feminist and environmental literature (Part One) with an analysis of thirty ‘conversations’ with women activists in Canada (Part Two), the purpose of which is to understand in greater depth and empirical detail what motivates such women to become involved in environmental activism, and what impacts this has on them. The wider aim of the book is to challenge the ecofeminist emphasis on caring (and especially ‘maternalism’), and to argue for a ‘feminist ecological citizenship’, which valorizes, and brings into the public domain, the complex diversity of women’s environmental activism.

My own interests as both an academic researcher/writer and campaigner on the gendering of environmental issues have drawn me to three themes, which emerge from *Beyond Mothering Earth*. These are: the uneasy relationship between private (caring) and public (citizenship) activities; the failure of the environmental movement to engage with feminism and gendered structures of re/production; and methodological issues arising from using the voices of women activists.

Questioning how legitimate ‘motherhood’ and other caring roles are as a qualification for environmental concern, MacGregor is critical of how ecofeminist writers have used and valued these activities in under-investigated and unproblematized ways and is wary of how readily they can be essentialized, or at least, pigeonhole women’s activity. The current emphasis on personal and domestic responsibility to take environmental action will inevitably bear more heavily on women as long as they continue to undertake the majority of household chores and caring responsibilities. Rather than increasing Foucauldian disciplining to achieve environmental

ends, MacGregor calls for the state to take a more proactive role to deliver what might be called (although she does not use this term) 'social-environmental' planning. Examples might include higher-density housing with communal facilities, which Dolores Hayden was advocating back in the 1980s as beneficial for women, and which can be seen today to deliver environmental benefits. Core to this, however, is the full involvement of women, alongside men, as public citizens and decision-makers.

The environmental movement has been no ally to women, whether in challenging existing gendered structures of power (including, incidentally, many of their own boards and senior management), or simply more equally sharing the added burden of domestic work so that women are not disproportionately affected. Nor is the question of the division of reproductive labour answered by green political theorists. Referring to British and US evidence, MacGregor notes the sexism, masculinism and lack of 'an understanding of feminism' in the environmental movement (p. 83), an observation that my own work in and on the environmental movement echoes. Both formal and informal environmental political action will need to address this if there is to be fundamental and socially just environmental change. Although MacGregor is cautious about 'earthcare' as a metaphor for social and environmental change, writers such as Caroline Merchant and the late Val Plumwood have, in their more recent books, called for a partnership ethics between women and men to challenge current divisions and valuation of labour in order to make positive environmental change, a call which environmental groups would be prudent to heed.

MacGregor's interviews reveal a number of interesting issues. Although she anticipated that these interviews would 'complicate' the picture of women's activism, they are remarkably similar to accounts elsewhere. While MacGregor aims to 'disrupt and complicate a particular profile of women engaged in quality-of-life activism that is constructed in the ecofeminist and feminist texts' to which she is responding (p. 181), motherhood and caring seem to be the most influential motivations for her interviewees. Most of these were mothers, who reported undertaking the main responsibility in the household for environmental behaviour 'managing their families' participation' (p. 202), although the most successful long-term activists seemed to have households in which the division of labour became more equally divided. As part of her reflexive methodology, MacGregor invited her interviewees to comment on their own, and her (sometimes conflicting) analyses of what was being said. An interesting dimension of the book is a discussion on the relationship between the researcher and the researched, on how academic and activist work can be articulated with each other, and the tension between allowing women to 'speak for themselves' and to be interpreted. While MacGregor is not able to answer these questions, she exposes the process through which

they come to be asked, and resolved, for the purposes of her own research, in a thoughtful and open way.

I am strongly of the opinion that we cannot address environmental damage in isolation from women's inequality, and social justice more broadly. The environmental justice movement has been established on the boundaries of social inequality and environmental damage, and yet, as this book also points out, generally fails to engage with gender inequality. The ecofeminist literature has suffered a not entirely justified neglect in recent years, and Sherilyn MacGregor's timely book is a thoughtful and reflective reappraisal of an ecofeminism, which calls for both feminists and environmentalists to combine their campaigning voices to address one of the twenty first century's most critical issues: environmental destruction. It also calls for strong state action to create the broader physical and political structures in which this might be achieved.

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