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Beyond Mothering Earth: Ecological Citizenship and the Politics of Care

Sherilyn MacGregor; Vancouver-Toronto BC; UBC Press; 2006; 2 forward pages; 283 text pages; price \$85.00 (H); \$29.95 (PB); ISBN 0-7748-1202-8

Subdivided into two parts, MacGregor's book is a general discussion on and criticism of various feminist views on care and ecology, including a 'conversation' with a group of feminist environmental 'activists' in Toronto, Canada.

She starts with a critical analysis of a feminist tendency to link women's alleged specific and inherent commitment to care in general and with ecological politics in particular. She is of the opinion that ecofeminist scholarship is merely academic, rhetorical, and short of political engagement. To reinforce the gender divide by stressing motherhood and alleged feminine-specific qualities such as care she considers counterproductive as it defeats the purpose of gender equality. More specifically, MacGregor disagrees with the commonly assigned gender-specific capacity of women as caretakers of the environment. This, she argues, omits their role as citizens from the equation. As an ecofeminist, she endeavours avoiding feministic essentialism that contends that the mere fact of being female endows women with specific essential qualities. She argues that ecofeminism is rooted in the reality of *what* women have always done (due to socialisation and because of the social circumstances in which they find themselves) rather than *who* they are (some elemental physiological and spiritual affinity that places them close to nature). Furthermore, at variance with other trends in feminist activism at grassroots level, MacGregor asserts that ecofeminism should be a conscious choice to engage in public life rather than the result of a mere extension of women's roles in the private sphere. This, she claims, is the shortcoming of female grassroots environmental movements that originate in a local context and concludes with the solving of a local problem.

MacGregor's ecofeminism aims at being gender-inclusive and at the promotion of women's citizenship in an egalitarian society. She advocates rejecting the right wing (i.e. male neo-liberal) concept of citizenship and its rejection of the welfare state that puts the onus of care (for children, elders, and disabled) back into the private sphere (i.e. on women). Because women acting as citizens are seen as 'mothers/citizens' (with emphasis on mothers), citizenship needs to be reinvigorated "as a political location from which to destabilise the boundaries between public and private" aiming at "the collective provision of social goods like care" (p. 5). Since we live currently in a context of local and global environmental degradation, MacGregor advocates feminist ecological citizenship. Central to her project is that it would promote women's status as first-class citizens, help them to exercise their gender-related care for quality-of-life matters (private, public, and environmental), and provide the opportunity to partake to the debate on environmental justice (the collective responsibility for human and non-human well-being).

Based upon empirical research on environmental issues confronting inner-city neighbourhoods and low-income communities in Toronto, Canada, in the second part of her book MacGregor presents her 'conversations' with thirty activist women. Largely, she examines the participants' motivations and the constraints they met with when engaged in ecofeminist activism. Motivations for their environmental activism vary from the willingness to engage with environmental and other quality-of-life issues (including their children's), to 'feeling good' through participation, as well as serving as an escape from domestic gender-stereotypic roles. Time-management was their main constraint; the price to pay was time taken away from the children for whose future welfare they were working.

A positive aspect of the book is MacGregor's well-balanced analysis of the various expressions of feminism. Although she avoids an oppositional gender-biased stance, a male reader might sense some compromise in her stance (i.e. of course, not all males are *machos*). The main criticism

concerning part two (acknowledged by the author) is the sample size and the specific setting of the empirical arm. Of course, an empirical study cannot avoid a specific setting.

Since the author's ecofeminism aims at being all encompassing (i.e. not excluding males) the role of male partners (positive or negative) in the local environmental movement might have added an interesting perspective. For example, the time constraints experienced by the research participants were mainly due to household chores and child-care. Therefore, one of the solutions might have been to include any partners who might have contributed to greater responsibility sharing and movement support as well as record reasons as to why those who did not contribute.

MacGregor summarises her view on what, in her eyes, feminist ecological citizenship should look like:

What makes feminist ecological citizenship distinct from other approaches is that it refuses the privatisation and feminisation of care and calls for a public debate and action on how foundational acts of labour (e.g., care) can be reorganised to allow for women's equal participation as citizens. Care is thereby politicised as a necessary part of citizenship (p.220).

This book opens a useful and needed debate on effacing the divide between what the traditional patriarchal society and the neo-liberal right have maintained between public and private (women's stuff) spheres. She manages to avoid the essentialist and the NIMB (not in my backyard) traps of other feminist approaches. However, despite the fact that she intends staying away from 'academic' discourse (i.e., her 'conversations'), her endeavours might well remain 'academic' in the neo-liberal settings of her research. As much as it is imperative, in light of the current Northern/Western tendency to move away from a social welfare state, it might appear difficult to achieve feminist ecological citizenship in that part of the world. This is not to say that it should not be done. In the rest of the world, grass-roots activism for women - due to a myriad of reasons such as patriarchal societies, power imbalances, customary decrees. etc. - remains the only alternative. In other words, more research is needed to investigate if and to what extent MacGregor's proposed model is feasible beyond the North and not wholly academic.

This book will be of special interest to activists, students and scholars interested in gender equality and the environment. In broadening the often-narrow focus of some feminist thinking to include that of ecological citizenry, MacGregor contributes to a new perspective which, if adopted, could result in a better quality of life for all in the private, public, and global sphere. Since it is (relatively) easy reading, its appeal caters to a wide audience.