

# AN INTERVIEW WITH ALICIA PULEO<sup>1</sup>: REFLECTIONS ON ECOFEMINISM

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## Introduction

From the beginning of the eighties ecofeminism has revealed how the model of patriarchal capitalist exploitation that has brought us to the present environmental crisis, had turned its back on nature and remained clearly alien to an ethics of care. Nowadays it is necessary to re-think the socio-cultural parameters that have objectified nature subordinating it to the logics of an economy-focused exploitation inside a neo-liberal context. However, it is not enough to think that climate change and the present ecological crisis can be dealt with as a simple problem of our 'life style'. It is necessary to go beyond questioning the levels of production and consumption that are instigated by the capitalist bubble of (post)modernity in which we live to propose solutions that are urgently needed.

In this sense Alicia Puleo's book, *Ecofeminismo para otro mundo posible*, presents us with a new Ariadne, daughter of feminist theories and ecology. Puleo's ecofeminism responds not only to an ethical reflection but also to a socio-political consideration of the relationship between human beings and nature. She proposes a critical ecofeminism that lays claim to the principles of

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1. Alicia Puleo is a pioneer in ecofeminism and its main representative in Spain. She has a Ph.D. in Philosophy and is Professor of Ethics and Political Philosophy at the University of Valladolid (Spain). She has written many articles and books on Feminist Philosophy and Environmental Ethics including *Dialéctica de la sexualidad. Género y sexo en la Filosofía Contemporánea*, Cátedra, Madrid, 1992; *El reto de la igualdad de género. Nuevas perspectivas en Ética y Filosofía Política*, Editorial Biblioteca Nueva, Madrid, 2008. Her latest book is *Ecofeminismo. Para otro mundo posible*, Cátedra, Madrid, 2011.

equality, proposing the universalization of an ethics of care, not just towards human beings but also towards animals and nature, at the same time as she takes on an intercultural dialogue and affirms a sense of compassion as a path towards a new ecological culture. Puleo skilfully criticizes neoliberal globalization, condemning social injustices and inequalities. But she also proposes practical and theoretical solutions to create a more sustainable future, defending her claim that another world is possible whilst considering concepts such as freedom, equality and sustainability.

However, certain questions remain unsolved. Do we urgently need a radical social catharsis and what form would it take? Is it really possible to conceive an ecofeminist theory that might realistically challenge dominant neoliberalism? And, in this case, what would its main characteristics be? The following is a summary of the interview carried out with Alicia Puleo in which she responds to these questions, as well as defining the main characteristics of critical ecofeminism as a philosophical challenge and a social movement.

#### **What does ecofeminism mean for you?**

I understand ecofeminism as the recognition of two unresolved subjects of ethics and political philosophy. On the one hand, we have already begun but have not yet achieved the task of becoming a society, a culture, that is really egalitarian and not androcentric. On the other hand, we believe that it is necessary to do something to stop the progress of climatic change, environmental contamination and the destruction of our biodiversity [...]

As for my own position as an ecofeminist, which is described in detail in the book *Ecofeminismo. Para otro mundo posible*, I have called it 'critical ecofeminism' in order to underline the necessity to conserve, whilst duly reviewing and updating, the enlightened legacy against prejudice as well as addressing the equality and autonomy of women.

#### **Do you think there is a unique 'ecofeminism' or, on the contrary, should we speak of 'ecofeminisms'?**

It has been said that there are as many types of ecofeminism as there are ecofeminists. What justifies the use of the term 'ecofeminism' in the singular is that they all share the same approach and are able to articulate different contributions from feminism and ecology [...]

Historically speaking, the roots of ecofeminism come from the union of feminist activists with ecologists, and the role of women conceived as mediators between nature and culture. In your book however, you claim that to be an ecofeminist does not necessarily imply that women are more connected to nature or to life than men. Surely this idea goes against the voices of some promoters of ecofeminism like Vandana Shiva?

I'd like to go back to the ideas that underpin this question. Simone de Beauvoir in *The Second Sex* condemned the fact that the patriarchal legitimization of the exclusion of women from Culture came from their designation as the Other, as Mother Earth, as Nature. Sherry Ortner held that all cultures saw the Woman as being a mediator between Nature and Culture due to their responsibilities of upbringing and preparing food (1974). Following this, during the late seventies of the last century some ecofeminists developed an essentialist line of thought, accepting the traditional bipolarization of sexes. Women, from their point of view, were closer to Nature, as they were both givers and carers of Life, whilst men were considered aggressive beings biologically destined for war. In the eighties this 'classical' ecofeminism was criticised by Vandana Shiva who, as a follower of Mahatma Gandhi's ideas, appropriately pointed out, using the figure of the famous pacifist, that not all men responded to this prototype of destructive essence. But even Shiva was accused by some feminists from her own country of conducting an essentialization and idealization of 'the Indian woman', by forgetting factors such as class and rural or urban context. I'm not going to enter into the complex polemic on Shiva's work. I will, however, state that the ecofeminist works of a philosophical nature that have developed from the nineteen nineties onwards have avoided falling into a stereotyped vision of gender. My own work can be seen inside this framework of aspiration to analyse culture and the conviction of its possibilities for transformation.

**Is it possible to talk of ecofeminism without any consideration of gender?**

The perspective of gender is a powerful tool of analysis to understand the cultural processes that have constructed sexual identities. It has served and serves to perceive and make visible the inequality, discrimination and prejudices of sex, as long as it is bestowed with a critical content, of course. The concept of gender and the system of sex-gender are also, in some cases, used by social sciences with a merely descriptive character: for example, when it is said that women in such and such a society are in charge of this, and men are in charge of that, or that the rules for the female group are these and those

for men are these others, etc. By including the concept of gender in the last third of the twentieth century, feminism gave it an ethical use and meaning, referring to values and readings of political philosophy that go way beyond the simple descriptive use. Notions like those of justice, equality or non-discrimination belong to this register.

When I speak of gender in my ecofeminist works, I assume the concept of this double descriptive and critical meaning that belongs to feminism. There are feminists who prefer not to use this term, but this is not my case.

**In your book you claim that ‘We need to think of the reality of our current world with the keys that feminism and ecology have given us’ (Puleo, 2011: 403). What are these keys?**

In the space of this interview it’s impossible to go into detail, but I’ll at least try to give some clues [...]

Environmentalism provides us with the holistic perspective necessary to understand that we live in ecosystems in which all the elements are inter-linked and depend on each other. It warns us that we are heading towards an abyss without return and that it is time to discover more satisfying ways of living, from our diet to the administration of our time (which by no means implies going back to a primitive society). It also offers us a vision which transcends anthropocentrism, going beyond that narcissistic and guileless look of our species that thinks that the *anthropos* is the centre of the world, the bearer of the meaning of all existence.

By condemning the androcentric subtext of control over the natural non-human world, typical of the model of the warrior and the conqueror, by showing us other ways of being in contact with Nature, through caring for it, ecofeminism allows us to take a step back from the devastating and individualistic consumer society which surrounds us.

**Do you really think it is possible to build a society where equality and sustainability are prioritized?**

If there is something we can be absolutely sure of, it is that we will not be able to progress towards a better world without having a regulative horizon to head towards [...]

To answer your question about whether I believe in the possibility of building a fair and ecologically sustainable society I will answer with a phrase from Gramsci that I feel is particularly appropriate: ‘pessimism of the intellect, optimism of the will’. Having said that, I would also like to add that there are

certain fields undergoing change that are making really surprising progress. The growing extension of the notion of rights to include nonhuman animals - for equality going beyond humanity - seems to me to be a sign of generosity and willingness to do justice that gives me back faith in our species. And the same technological means, by which today a neoliberal globalization is taking place, which exploits and destroys at a rhythm which had not been possible before, could be used to fight for that other world which is possible. A simple example: nowadays we collect signatures in campaigns which are concerned with human beings, animals and remote ecosystems that we will probably never even know, and yet they still provoke our empathy, our indignation, our action. The internet and its social networks form a virtual realm that allows us to know facts that are often silenced by the mass media. And it's not just about receiving information but also exchanging it and acting in consequence as a global society that cares for a common Earth.

#### **What role should ecofeminism play in that of political ecology?**

I have held that ecofeminism is, because of its feminist starting point, a social environmentalism that questions the existing connections between the exploitation of Nature and that which human beings suffer. Ecofeminism is the gender awareness of Political Ecology. This doesn't mean that it is a special section of Political Ecology or that it can be classified inside it. Ecofeminism, like feminism in general, is multiple and it is advisable that it keeps its independence and diversity [...]

#### **What does it take to be a real ecofeminist in the 21<sup>st</sup> century?**

I'm not trying to lay down rules! I think that there are many ways of being an ecofeminist in the 21<sup>st</sup> century and that, in a way, it depends on our context (rural or urban), our beliefs (religious or atheist), and our activities (professional, family, political, cultural, etc.) The ecofeminist agenda is not closed; it is, on the contrary, in the process of being created. However, I would like to point out something that is both basic and common to all the forms possible: it requires authenticity in its feeling, beyond being a passing fad, and the will for social change. Ecofeminism cannot remain a solitary practice of personal development or a trend that is abandoned as soon as a magazine dictates antifeminist and anti-ecological rules in order to become supposedly glamorous and be on the crest of the wave. Ecofeminism is both reason and passion transformed [...]

**Despite the development of ecofeminism in other European countries and in USA, ecofeminism does not appear to have taken the same path in countries such as Spain or Latin America. What do you think are the main reasons for this?**

I've asked myself the same question many times. The most immediate answer is, undoubtedly, that its development depends on the degree of expansion of environmental visions amongst both the population in general and the intellectual media. Looking at this in more depth, we can say that in the Anglo-Saxon world industrial development took place before allowing at the same time for an earlier discovery of the less affable side of a chemical society: the effects of contamination in human health and the disappearance of biodiversity. If we go back even further in time and look for the causes, we can find a socio-cultural difference that would appear to be alien to the question that you have just asked me: the protestant Reformation as an interiorization of the relation with what is transcendental, the engine of initial capitalism (and, therefore, of modern technological development), as Max Weber would state, and the starting point of the later archetype of autonomy of the Enlightenment. This sceptical attitude towards environmentalism can be observed in many people from countries strongly marked by centuries of Catholicism and can be related to the custom of associating all the codes of behaviour, whether rational or irrational, with an external imposition [...] Another factor to bear in mind is our relationship with landscape. It has been proved that environmentalism has had a faster and deeper implementation in nations which admire and respect their forests to the point that they associate their identity with them. In cultures in which the tree is seen as an obstacle that must be suppressed in order to achieve modern development, the road to environmentalism and ecofeminism is far more rocky (and the metaphor is doubly pertinent here).

**What do you think are the main challenges that ecofeminism faces today?**

There are many, but I will highlight three: defy the lack of information about the dark side of our consumer society and offer alternative models, fight against stereotypes related to ecofeminism and confront the existing Patriarchal Counter-Reformation.

The first is common to environmentalism. Thanks to the internet and social networks, today we can try to counteract the silence about the perverse side of a consumer society [...] To inform ourselves about this perverse side is a moral obligation and a political responsibility. Once we have begun raising awareness, we can look for and undertake healthier, more caring and more satisfactory alternative ways of life.

The second challenge is specific to ecofeminism. It is necessary to go beyond the common spheres of what ecofeminism is. This is one of the challenges that I had in mind whilst elaborating an ecofeminist theory that would not reject the feminist legacy of Modernity, that is, the recognition of the autonomy and equality for women [...]

Finally, the third challenge is to tackle what I have called the Patriarchal Counter-Reformation. Each time that there has been emancipatory progress for women in history there has been a sexist and even misogynist reaction. This was the case after the first and second wave of feminism, as Susan Faludi has demonstrated in *Backlash* [...] Religious fundamentalism is another engine of the Patriarchal Counter-Reformation. In Spain, for example, this can be found in a proposed law against the termination of pregnancy that is a return to the past and a denial of women as autonomous subjects capable of a conscious motherhood. Even in certain branches of environmentalism an attempt to send women back to the domestic sphere and to their function of being full-time mothers can be seen as an appeal to what is 'natural'. Alongside this Patriarchal Counter-Reformation that reduces us to bodies for pleasure and for breeding, ecofeminism has to affirm, loud and clear, that women are people and that we are not going to surrender the spaces of liberty conquered by the feminist struggle of those who came before us.

