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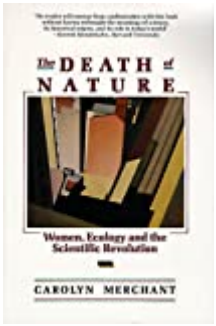

Carolyn Merchant. *The Death of Nature: Women, Ecology and the Scientific Revolution.* New York: HarperCollins, 1980. 348 pp. $16.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-06-250595-8.

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A Dialectic of Domination: Carolyn Merchant's *The Death of Nature: Women, Ecology and the Scientific Revolution*

[Note: This review is part of the H-Ideas Retrospective Reviews series. This series reviews books published during the twentieth century which have been deemed to be among the most important contributions to the field of intellectual history.]

In their classic work *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, German Critical Theorists Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno argued that the Western project of enlightened thought – which they distinguished from "the Enlightenment" as a historic period – conflated the technical domination of nature with the social domination of people. The values of calculation, quantification, and exchange that form the heart of bourgeois thinking are essential to social processes that seek to master nature. Moreover, the drive for domination that Horkheimer and Adorno found at the core of western reason contained a gendered dimension. Enlightened man's quest to overcome the primitive forces of nature demanded that he deploy entrepreneurial power over men and patriarchal power over women and children. Horkheimer and Adorno thus argued that critical investigations into the western project of mastery of nonhuman nature must recognize the dimensions of human domination intertwined into the drive to subjugate the green world.

Carolyn Merchant's distinguished text *The Death of Nature: Women, Ecology and the Scientific Revolution* engaged in just such a critical investigation as it endeavored to reveal the historic connection between the domination of nature and women. Merchant explained that her volume sought "to examine the values associated with the images of women and nature as they relate to the formation of our modern world and their implications for our lives today" (p. xxi). The "implications for our lives today" provided the moral grounding for this work in which Merchant advocated the need to "reexamine the formation of a world view and a science that, by reconceptualizing reality as a machine rather than a living organism, sanctioned the domination of both nature and women" (p. xxi). The core of the book, then, is a "broad synthesis" that examined the social and ecological changes wrought by the new images of nature associated with the Scientific Revolution. The premodern, organic view of a feminine natural world gave way to a mechanistic cosmology that perceived the green world of nature as inert matter, a machine available to human manipulation.

Some readers will remain skeptical at Merchant's compressed depiction of a premodern European philosophical outlook that unified nature and culture; how-

ever, Merchant acknowledged the diversity of premodern thought and that early Europeans "quarried the mountainsides, altered the landscape, and overgrazed the hills" (p. 3). Yet Merchant persuasively argued that the dominant feminine, organic theory of nature prominent in many ancient systems of knowledge shaped the governing metaphors that helped regulate human behavior toward the earth. Thus writers such as the Roman compiler Pliny cautioned against deep mining, citing earthquakes as Mother Nature's indignation at such intrusive violations. Moreover, Pliny warned that the mining of gold corrupted mankind thereby contributing to the avarice that fueled robberies, murders and wars. Europeans still followed Pliny's admonitions as late as the sixteenth century, enough so that a proponent of mining such as Georg Agricola felt it necessary to refute them in his 1556 work *De Re Metallica* ("On Metals").

Organic conceptions of nature that emphasized interrelationships and organic unity rather than hierarchy and mastery lent themselves to social ideologies based upon democratic values. (Merchant noted that organicism and mechanism later fused in the form of twentieth-century totalitarianism.) Thus the premodern connection between women and nature infused utopian thought such as Tommaso Campanella's 1602 work *City of the Sun*, which envisioned an organic society characterized by communal sharing of goods, property and knowledge. Conversely, when popular images of the green world stressed the disorderly nature of illnesses, storms and ruined crops, ideologies that emphasized the need to control both nature and women rose to prominence. Niccolo Machiavelli's injunction to conquer a wild and feminine Fortune exemplified a philosophy of domination that encompassed nature and women. The ideological conflation of social and natural disorder similarly informed attitudes toward witchcraft. Merchant argued that, "the disorder symbolized in the macrocosm by the dissolution of the frame of nature and the uncivilized wilderness of the new world, in society by the witch who controlled the forces of nature and the women who overturned its order...heralded the death of the old order of nature" (p. 148).

The death of the old order of nature came at the hands of the newly developing capitalist economic system of the sixteenth century and the mechanistic ideology that sanctioned its worldly activity. The chief ideologists of the new program were Francis Bacon and Rene Descartes. Bacon's view that religion and science were engaged in a mutual effort to compensate for the damage done to humanity by the expulsion from Paradise valorized the tendencies toward growth and technological innovation inherent in early capitalism. Descartes' mechanism furthered the Baconian program by effectively removing spirit from nature and the human body, positing that external objects consisted solely of quantities.

Moreover, Merchant observed that "In France, the rise of the mechanical world view was coincident with a general tendency toward central governmental control and the concentration of power in the hands of the royal ministers" (p. 205). The relationship between mechanistic philosophy and hierarchical social orders continued with the abstract materialism of Thomas Hobbes, who relied upon mechanical models of society to solve philosophical difficulties associated with disorder in his *Leviathan.*

After assessing such ideas, Merchant contended that the mechanistic philosophies of nature which easily associated with hierarchy and social power "sanctioned the management of both nature and society"(p. 235). Contemporary examples of mechanism include the utilitarian conservation movement, which Merchant characterized as an "adaptation of the rationalizing tendencies inherent in mechanism applied to the natural environment" (p. 238). Like its contemporary counterpart, however, early modern mechanisms spurred countervailing philosophies such as the vitalism of Anne Conway (1631-1679) that remained rooted in an organic worldview and articulated no essential differences between spirit and body. Indeed, Conway, whose writings exerted a great influence on what Merchant termed the "dynamic vitalism" of Leibniz, argued for the interdependence of all creatures under God, unified in a central spirit that governed all things. Merchant noted the many philosophical deficiencies of vitalism, yet given contemporary ecological dilemmas that arise in part from the lack of organic value systems, concluded that "we might regret that the mechanists did not take their vitalistic critics more seriously" (p. 268).

Despite the originality and many successes of Merchant's book, informed first-time and repeat readers will surely wish to differ with some of its assertions. Merchant's reconstruction of a premodern culture that posited an organic and harmonious nature and culture remains problematic. Her depiction of historical causality also feels simplified, even if one acknowledges the need for concise representations of the complex philosophical traditions that comprise the largest part of her evidence. Too, other readers will surely quibble with the

interpretations of various figures and her perhaps excessively ambitious thesis; for example, Merchant's assertion of connections between mechanism and the social subordination of women remains somewhat speculative, even to the sympathetic reader.

Yet twenty years after its initial publication *The Death of Nature* continues to impress most readers with the vitality of its argument and its sophisticated embodiment of the type of historically and theoretically informed scholarship advocated by thinkers such as Horkheimer and Adorno. Indeed, the strongest parts of Merchant's message resonate now more than ever: surely our current era of capitalist triumphalism and globalization calls for both ecological analysis and thoughtful criticisms of positivist models of knowledge. The ethical components of Merchant's work also continue to demand our attention. Her implication that holistic ecology can extend democratic principles toward nonhuman life carries the reader directly into the wide-ranging moral issues informing the human relationship with nonhuman nature.

Finally, Merchant's book helped shape many of the core issues of the two disciplines in which it is firmly canonized. Environmental historians continue to investigate and debate the role of ideas in shaping the human relationship with nature, and, perhaps most importantly, continue to criticize economies from an ecological perspective. Similarly, ecofeminists have furthered Merchant's vital investigations into the gendered interactions of people and nature and her moral concern with participatory democracy. Such issues remain essential to these and other disciplines, and thereby ensure the continued relevance of *The Death of Nature*. Merchants ambitious text, then, despite its shortcomings, continues to reward both new and repeat readers because it speaks in a critical and engaging manner to some of the most pressing intellectual, moral, and political issues of our time.

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