

Françoise d'Eaubonne's Ecofeminism

An overlooked left wing perspective

by Iris Derzelle

Rediscovering an activist thinker who was at the origins of eco-feminism, but remains unknown. Her work inspired an extremely heterogeneous movement, but has her ambition to concretely transform the social, economic and political organisation of society been pursued?

A feminist and ecologist, an activist who supported denuclearization, the homosexual cause, the abolition of prisons, and a member of the Communist Party for ten years, Françoise d'Eaubonne fought on every front. She expressed her stance openly and unapologetically, in an uninhibited style with little respect for academic conventions. This major figure of the French left who was long ignored is gradually gaining recognition, mainly thanks to Caroline Goldblum's and Serge Latouche's work. They have collaborated on several publications, including the re-edition of *Écologie et féminisme. Révolution ou mutation?* published by Libre & solidaire¹ in 2018. This was the work in which Françoise d'Eaubonne expounded her ecofeminist theory, which she mentioned for the first time in 1974 in *Le féminisme ou la mort*, a work that was long unavailable but was finally reprinted in October 2020 by Le Passager Clandestin.

¹ Caroline Goldblum and Serge Latouche respectively signed the preface and postface to *Écologie et féminisme. Révolution ou mutation ?* They also collaborated on *Françoise d'Eaubonne et l'écoféminisme*, published 2019 in the collection directed by S. Latouche for Le passager clandestin, "Les précurseur·ses de la décroissance". The booklet, a compilation of excerpts of texts by Françoise d'Eaubonne, is edited and prefaced by C. Goldblum, who also dedicated his doctoral thesis to the activist.

Conception of a revolutionary way of thinking

From the 1970s onwards, Françoise d'Eaubonne took a deep interest in environmental issues. This was the time when the first signs of climate disruption began to appear and, although still incipient, intensive agriculture was beginning to impact ecosystems. In 1974, for the first time an ecologist candidate, René Dumont, stood for the French presidential elections. Françoise d'Eaubonne was soon convinced by his ideas and supported his candidature. Dumont, trained as an agricultural engineer, believed strongly in the ecological need for population control and saw women's emancipation as an absolute priority.

The activist endorsed this approach and, taking it further, soon stated that the exploitation of the earth was ultimately "just" another form of exploitation. For the left-wing activist, excessive use of natural resources had to stop, just as the capitalist mechanism of exploitation had to be abolished. D'Eaubonne also realised that human well being required land, a vast place to live, the Earth. While contemporary ecological discourse is often rooted in a critique of anthropocentrism, condemning the human tendency to situate Man at the centre of the universe and to transform everything to suit himself, d'Eaubonne on the contrary, adopts a humanist approach. She does not valorise nature intrinsically, but rather in relation to human life.

She hence supported Dumont in 1974, but the ecologists' low score in the presidential elections left her deeply disillusioned. The activist despaired of the potential for transforming existing institutions, and the ecologists' failure thrust her onto an anti-establishment path that was to shape her ecofeminism.

The foundations of d'Eaubonne's ecofeminism

Françoise d'Eaubonne became politicised at a very young age. Born in 1920, she was an adolescent when the Spanish Civil War broke out, and a young adult when the Second World War began. She joined the Resistance against Nazism and became a member of the French Communist Party when the war ended. A few years later, like many others, she challenged the Party's Algerian policy and left in 1957. It was about twenty years later that she developed her theory, still disappointed in the Neo-Marxists' dogmatic attitude. Without abandoning Communism's initial aims, or in other words the struggle for collective emancipation, she considered it important to learn from the Socialist fiascos that marked the beginning of the 20th century. The theory had to evolve in the light of these failures, and Marxist analyses had to acquire greater depth. According to the activist, the foundations of capitalist exploitation could not be reduced to the class struggle, but were the result of a series of age-old mental structures, which she qualified as "patriarchal".

She thus claimed that capitalism is an embodiment of a patriarchal imaginary, situating its emergence between the fourth and third millenniums BCE. According to her theory, a radical transformation of the continental infrastructure and superstructure took place at this time, influenced by the Nordic peoples. The plough is thought to have replaced the hoe, a key tool in traditional female agriculture, and land management was transferred to men—transforming the infrastructure. As a result it became possible to observe new natural phenomena such as cattle reproduction, and from this men supposedly derived their role in human reproduction—transforming the superstructure. According to the ecofeminist, men thus took global control of fertility, or in other words, control of the fertility of nature and women’s fertility, while the latter’s role in the reproduction process remained unknown. Women were hence considered non-participants in the procreation process and were consequently ignored in testamentary wills. This was, according to d’Eaubonne, the beginning of their socio-economic marginalisation.

Such an account of the origins of society supports the feminist argument that although unequal relationships between men and women are ancient, they are of a socio-historic nature—and hence were not always such, nor are they necessarily based on nature. The theory arguing that the Northern nomads were the instigators of patriarchy is more or less discounted today. Nonetheless, even if this narrative now seems doubtful, the analyses and hypotheses it opens on to are not devoid of interest: according to d’Eaubonne, the discovery of fecundity gave rise to new mental structures such as a desire for unlimited expansion and a desire to master what is not oneself (or one’s own). These mental structures would have been handed down over the centuries so that they continue to characterise the patriarchal imaginary today. They underpin all relationships of exploitation instigated ever since—the exploitation of women by men, workers by capitalists, nature by humans, or even the South by the North.

D’Eaubonne also boldly denounces the obsession with human reproduction, “overbreeding”, which she interprets as yet another demonstration of patriarchal unlimitedness. This overbreeding exacerbates the harmful effects of patriarchy-capitalism, as demographic growth leads to an increase in production and hence a solidification of the mechanisms used to exploit nature, employees, women and the South. To ensure a dignified life for every human being, we should hence agree to limit births. But while the majority of Neo-Malthusian discourses target African countries, when she calls for a population decline Françoise d’Eaubonne primarily addresses the industrialised countries. She also denounces the hypocrisy of these rich countries, which in a neo-colonial paternalistic manner lacking any kind of self-judgment, ask the countries of the South to control their births, and hence women’s bodies, in the name of economic development. Yet, she recalls, Western countries have a large share of responsibility in global inequalities—they pollute intensely and also organise the plunder of African minerals. In this way, Françoise d’Eaubonne yet again demonstrates that neither the environmental issue nor the condition of women can be viewed independently of a global analysis of injustice.

Socialism and feminism

Every battle that is fought to the end joins every other battle; every battle that distances itself from others—phenomenon of separation—loses sight of its own end. This is how, during its historic victories, the class struggle lost sight of the aim of the battle of the sexes (...). And this is how the battle of the sexes would deny itself if it lost sight of the aim of the class struggle, or in other words the disappearance of classes themselves, the end of employment and the market system. And neither the battle of the sexes nor the class struggle could succeed if either of them ignores the urgency of the ecological issue (...). We should never forget that autonomy is not separation; on the contrary, it is the basis of an encounter.²

According to Françoise d'Eaubonne, the Marxists who were little interested in the condition of women have failed to grasp the depth of the structures of exploitation. She thus follows Carla Lonzi, who made a similar statement in *Let's Spit on Hegel*, a work originally published in 1970 and republished in French in 2017 by Eterotopia France.³ In a fairly novel manner for the time, the Italian deplors the patriarchal culture of Marxism-Leninism and its indifference to domestic work, which for her part she sees an exploitative structure subjacent to the capitalist system of accumulation. The Frenchwoman analyses housework in similar terms. Excluded from production and assigned to the reproduction of the life cycle within the private sphere—to parturition, bringing up children or even cooking—women provide work that principally serves to emancipate the husband and the son and, in addition to being unpaid, it is often done under family pressure. Further, the children women raise go on to become worker-consumers, just like the husbands they feed. The capitalist system is hence clearly based on the invisible work of the reproductive class that is ultimately an indirect producer of a labour force sold to employers. Stating so early on that capitalism is based on the exploitation of the fairer sex made Lonzi and d'Eaubonne pioneers of materialist feminism. This trend that emerged at the beginning of the 1970s, mainly in France, is primarily characterized by the theorisation of patriarchy based on conceptual tools borrowed from Marxism.

Very soon the Frenchwoman wrote that taking control of their fecundity would help women undermine the system at several levels. By limiting the number of children they would reduce the number of producer-consumers and hence the rhythm of capitalist production. With this, they would also stem the exploitation of natural resources. In addition, freed from domestic tasks, they would appear in public space and could invest in the politico-economic organisation of society. Such institutional transformations in an atmosphere of collaboration and equality, would disrupt patriarchal hegemony and its associated mental structures. Further, due to their large numbers, emancipated women who join the ranks of the workers would double the number of revolutionaries and act as game-changers in the anti-capitalist struggle. The power relationship between men and women would hence connect the ecological, social, economic

² Françoise D'EAUBONNE, *Écologie et féminisme. Révolution ou mutation ?*, Paris, Libre & solidaire, 2018 (1978), pp. 166-167.

³ "Let's Spit on Hegel", transl. Victoria Newman, available at <http://blogue.nt2.uqam.ca/hit/files/2012/12/Lets-Spit-on-Hegel-Carla-Lonzi.pdf>. Originally published by Rivolta *Rivolta Femminile*, compiled as a book in 1974, with an English translation in Paola Bono and Sandra Kemp's *Italian Feminist Thought* (1991).

and political issues of the 20th century—that are also relevant in the 21st century. Henceforth, women should have access to contraception in order to be emancipated *and* for the emancipation of the workers, to end the exploitation of peoples *and* the exploitation of nature. Thus, for Françoise d'Eaubonne, “feminism is far more than feminism”.⁴

This vast complete institutional transformation is indissociable from a transformation of mental structures, but causality would not be pertinent here as these shifts take place mutually and occur continuously. Consequently, the denunciation of a patriarchal mentality must imperatively be tied to an effective struggle for a politico-economic renewal. The conclusions presented in *Écologie et féminisme*, the first ecofeminist work to be republished in the 20th century, along with the texts selected by Caroline Goldblum for *Françoise d'Eaubonne et l'écoféminisme*,⁵ confirm the eco-feminist's activist commitment and her concrete project: a reduction in working time, the abolition of the family cell, a return to gentle and extensive agriculture, or the decentralisation of power and the creation of communal type self-management committees, are so many paths to be envisaged for a fitting renewal of society. Françoise d'Eaubonne, who never lost sight of these goals, does not quibble over the system of patriarchal values, but updates it *in order to* bring about another form of collective organisation for which she is not afraid to suggest concrete and radical measures. Her aim is not to create alternative groups on the fringes of the system, but to provoke a mutation of the system itself.

On the fringes of ecofeminism

It is often said that it was during a trip to France that the philosopher Mary Daly discovered d'Eaubonne's thinking, which she went on to import into the United States. Nonetheless, ecofeminism also developed beyond the walls of universities. The anti-nuclear battles women engaged in from the 1970s onwards, in Seattle for example (with Starhawk) or in Greenham Common (with Alice Cook and Gwyn Kirk), the Chipko movement in India (represented notably by Vandana Shiva), or the Green Belt Movement in Kenya (founded by Wangari Maathai), are good illustrations of the activist aspect of the ecofeminist theory. But all said and done, it is not really relevant to radically distinguish the theoreticians from the activists, as the majority supported ecofeminism on both fronts.

Ecofeminist contributions have increased and today the movement includes several “famous names”: in addition to the ecofeminists mentioned above, and among many more, we can mention Susan Griffin, Carolyn Merchant, Maria Mies, or Val Plumwood. Their

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 128.

⁵ In this work we discover, for example, an information bulletin written by the Ecology-Feminism group created around d'Eaubonne, and *Appel à la grève de la procréation* (*Call for a procreation strike*) launched by the same group. Both these documents confirm the associations' actions, as well as its revolutionary vision. In this work we also find an excerpt of the conclusion to *Écologie et féminisme* reiterating the concrete paths to achieving the activist's project for society.

contributions are unique and differ from each other, but as they claim the same label d'Eaubonne's heirs doubtless have something in common—something must *link* them, and this term is perfectly appropriate here. It is difficult to discuss ecofeminism without talking about the imaginary of reconnection. This expression is an invitation to reconnect with oneself, one's body and one's emotions, as well as to reconnect to the living world, to humans, animals and to Nature. The spiritual exercises Starhawk invites people to practice in *Dreaming the Dark*, or *The Work that Reconnects* by Joanna Macy, are clear examples of this discourse of reconnection. These authors have, for example, developed the *Spiral Dance* (Starhawk) and *The Elm Dance* (J. Macy), collective “reconnection” dances during which the participants form a human chain, holding hands and doing a series of prescribed movements, ideally outdoors in nature. These practices are frequent in ecofeminism and, overall, the alternative milieus love them. Embracing the imaginary of reconnection seems increasingly to be a prerequisite for the “transition” to take place.

In addition, the ecofeminists are often close to care ethicists whose ethical framework includes attention, compassion, emotions, or even other elements, also characteristic of so-called feminine values. Among others, Val Plumwood's work is highly representative of this proximity. One of ecofeminism's main challenges is to promote social behaviour attributed to the female population and to question so-called patriarchal attitudes, which on the contrary, should be abandoned. Going further, the ecofeminists criticize the way the patriarchal imaginary is believed to systematically contrast and rank the body and the mind, nature and culture, emotions and reason, woman and man, etc. The first terms of these dual constructions are believed to be associated with the feminine and inferiorised, or even instrumentalised by the latter, which, on the contrary, are associated with the masculine. These dualities that pervade thinking and language are also believed to infiltrate institutions and human relationships. Most ecofeminists analyse the relationships of domination that undermine society through this prism: each dominated group would be associated with the female world and inferiorised on this basis.

These are the paths of reflection most often followed by ecofeminists, but we have barely touched upon Françoise d'Eaubonne's own arguments. For her part, the Frenchwoman suggests a reflection inspired more by women workers' struggles. Promoting a project for collective and social emancipation, she propounds a radically political thinking influenced by the Communist struggle, despite her proclaimed break with Marxism. She clearly promotes feminine values—but places the term “values” in inverted commas, and qualifies them as pre-patriarchal—at times she evokes the idea of duality, but does not make it her hobbyhorse. The change in mental structures and the transformation of society are indissociable, but the nuance lies in the focus, and in d'Eaubonne's case, it is indisputably on collective mobilisation. This should bring about a complete and concrete transformation of the social, economic and political organisation of society. Unlike numerous contemporary ecofeminists, Françoise d'Eaubonne does not harp on dualities and the “deconstruction” of discourse, nor on *reconnection*. She does not linger on “care values” nor does she exhort people to be pacifists, and is more likely to defend counter violence when she considers it necessary. For this activist it is legitimate, or even necessary to react

violently to systemic or State violence, a position confirmed by her involvement in the Fessenheim terrorist attack of 1975.⁶

Ecofeminist Omerta

Although she coined the term the actresses in the movement identify with, Françoise d'Eaubonne has ended up on the fringes of ecofeminism. She is rarely mentioned by ecofeminists—and when they do, it is only to respect a few vague genealogical requirements: the Frenchwoman forged the famous concept in 1974 but it had little impact at the time. The survival of the movement is mainly due to American women, who retrieved it and gave it the scope it has today. But a few short bibliographical notes cannot do justice to d'Eaubonne's work, and stating that her thinking was often overlooked is not the same as bringing her back into the spotlight.

The ecofeminists have nonetheless learnt to accept the plurality of the movement, which has seen its share of internal debates. Divergences have often emerged with regard to the relationship between women and Nature: is it about identifying a common destiny for entities linked by a common oppressor, or a specific proximity between women and the Earth? The question of spirituality is also divisive, with some sacralising their relationship to Nature, and others not. And while a consensus does exist on repudiating the obsession with rational control, presented as the primary reason for the exploitation of the living world, it also gives rise to another controversy: would it not be antithetical to academically formalise ecofeminism to the detriment of activist and artistic approaches that more actively honour the body and emotions?

These inconsistencies have nonetheless been accepted and tempered as illustrated, for example, by the compilation *Reclaim* edited by Émilie Hache in 2016. Nonetheless, the ecofeminists do not explain their silence. According to Caroline Goldblum, d'Eaubonne was rarely referred to on the Continent, as ecofeminism was long discredited in Europe by the other feminists. The latter were strongly influenced by Simone de Beauvoir and would not have approved of any connection between women and Nature. C. Goldblum also notes that the activist's specific centres of interest, like prehistory and science fiction, probably discouraged her readers. Elsewhere, Isabelle Cambourakis suggests that the radicalism of d'Eaubonne's actions and words, combined with her marked catastrophism, widespread in the early 1970s but difficult for posterity to justify, did not work in her favour either. While these hypotheses are undoubtedly convincing, we can suggest some further elements of an answer. Indeed, viewed against the yardstick of the History of ideas, other explanatory factors emerge, such as the collapse of the radical left in Europe and its demonization in the United States, the third wave

⁶ On May 3 1975, a group of activists bombed the Fessenheim site where the nuclear power plant was being built. Nobody was wounded in the attack, but the construction work was delayed for several months.

feminists' perplexity when faced with a Neo-Malthusian position, or even the success of post-modernism.

Questioning the silences

Finally, it is not really surprising that Western society of the 1970s and 80s found it difficult to accept a theory tinged with Communism. The left in America and Europe was suffering: the radical wing was condemned and the left-wing party shifted away from socialist ideals.

In Europe, the failure of Communist utopias precipitated the collapse of Socialism, and in the United States embroiled in the Cold War it was almost dangerous to support Socialist arguments. How then could anyone put forward an argument as radical as d'Eaubonne's?

In addition, from the 1980s onwards, a section of the feminists wanted to revalorize the image of the housewife, which the second wave (Women's Liberation Movement, among others) had sought to eliminate.

For the so-called third wave feminists a woman could indeed blossom at home and through maternity, if this was a chosen and desired condition. As the ecofeminists globally subscribed to this trend, it was yet again difficult to revive d'Eaubonne's Neo-Malthusian work. A similar dilemma emerged later with the progress of the biomedical sciences. A number of feminists consider today that medically assisted procreation represents social or even moral progress and should be defended. They hence adopt a stance little compatible with Neo-Malthusianism.

We should finally mention the tidal wave of post-modernism that rapidly filled the gap between d'Eaubonnan ecofeminism and the later forms of the movement. Indeed, the (eco)feminists of the end of the century were strongly marked by French theory, particularly in the United States. They thus maintained a particularly tenuous connection with Jacques Derrida, his deconstruction and his concept of carnophallogocentrism, a term coined by the philosopher, linking what he considered the three pillars of Western civilisations: animal sacrifice, male superiority and the supremacy of *logos*. Certainly there was vast internal diversity within the movement, but these thematic axes were indisputably recurrent. Ariel Salleh, a neo-Marxist eco-feminist, stands apart in this landscape as the figure who confirms the rule: she specifically bemoaned the dematerialised thinking of the third wave feminists, and hence of numerous ecofeminists, for whom the deconstruction of discourse took precedence over the development and defence of a concrete collective project—which had been the left's initial task.

D'Eaubonne's political vision thus remained marginalised. Was this silence confirmation of a conclusive cleavage between her ecofeminism and the later forms of the

movement? Going further, would this not reveal a strong contrast between the activist's radical thinking and the thinking of today's left, more focused on identity issues and the "internal revolution" than on a concrete political project?

Being left wing with Françoise d'Eaubonne

In many ways, d'Eaubonne would paradoxically be closer to the radical left than women who claim to be ecofeminists today. The Frenchwoman put forward a revolutionary democratic project for the city, and her Neo-Malthusianism, disturbing for posterity, reveals this ambition. When d'Eaubonne supported population decline, she favoured a societal project with an atomised exertion of individual freedom, but this freedom is illusory in the absence of collective freedom. Thinking with d'Eaubonne thus implies seeking the autonomy of the city.

However, when we shift the political cursor to focus on identity or morality, the politico-economic emancipation of the group is likely to be obscured, and may give rise to a fallacious distinction between right and left-wing ecofeminists. Those ecofeminists who associate women with nature, on the basis of similar natural cycles, express a fairly essentialist and conservative, ethico-social discourse, hence a "right" wing one; and "left-wing" ecofeminists would quite simply be all the others. However, the familiar essentialist issue disappears quite quickly on a reading of the texts, and this recurring debate is unfounded or has little to support it. It nonetheless maintains the focus on questions of identity or moral issues. Thus, in the context of a depoliticised political chessboard, and a false debate, the majority of ecofeminists seem to belong to the "left" and Françoise d'Eaubonne, for her part, is pushed back to the so-called extreme or even dangerous fringes. This corroborates Evelyne Pieiller's arguments (*Le Monde diplomatique*), in which she states not without concern, that the contemporary left seems more focused on an internal revolution than on the social revolution. In E. Pieiller's view the left today is "in search of greater sensitivity": Socialism, now empty, seeks the meaning of its actions in care for the soul and practices to redevelop spiritual connections, and would be forgetting the true "soul" of the left, in other words, the revolutionary project.

Inspired by the French ecofeminist's political aplomb, are contemporary readers also likely to conclude that today's left lacks vision and projects? Tightly grouped around a core of individual "progressive" demands, is it not more dedicated to political liberalism than to a revolutionary project? If this were to be the case, it would be playing a dangerous game, as neoliberalism easily instrumentalises the discourse of individual rights for economic reasons. It is hence fortunate that Françoise d'Eaubonne, who had long remained on the fringes, is finding her way back into bookshops. And could she not also find her way back to the street? After all, when citizens demonstrated for democracy and popular sovereignty in Paris, Santiago in Chile, Bagdad, Algiers, or even Hong Kong, was it not in the name of collective autonomy, which Françoise d'Eaubonne also supported? It is true that the coronavirus pandemic has brought

most of these movements to a halt, but we will continue at least to ask (ourselves) whether the disintegration of public space that we see today does not, in passing, *serve* certain political purposes, that the ecofeminist would have encouraged us to challenge.

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