

Review

Reviewed Work(s): *Radical Ecology* by Carolyn Merchant

Review by: John Bellamy Foster

Source: *Science & Society*, Vol. 58, No. 1 (Spring, 1994), pp. 120-123

Published by: Guilford Press

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40403398>

Accessed: 01-09-2016 16:09 UTC

---

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact [support@jstor.org](mailto:support@jstor.org).

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at  
<http://about.jstor.org/terms>



*S&S Quarterly, Inc., Guilford Press* are collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Science & Society*

capitalist government activity on the business cycle. Third, it considers the effects of inflation. Against this more realistic background, it discusses policy issues and strategies. The book claims that the working class is sorely hurt by the business cycle, and so will eventually be led to change the system. While depressions do energize the workers' movement to protest current conditions and to support more liberal or radical politics, there is so far no indication that this experience is sufficient to ground a widespread movement to change the system itself.

This book is useful for specialists with economic and mathematical training. Because the translation is poor, the explanations brief, and the mathematics extensive, it is not a book for casual readers.

HOWARD J. SHERMAN

*Department of Economics*  
*University of California*  
*Riverside, CA 92521*

*Radical Ecology*, by Carolyn Merchant. New York: Routledge, 1992. \$49.95; paper, \$14.95. Pp. xvii, 276.

Carolyn Merchant is known principally as the author of two landmark studies in ecological history and theory: *The Death of Nature: Women, Ecology and the Scientific Revolution* (1980) and *Ecological Revolutions: Nature, Gender and Science in New England* (1989). In *The Death of Nature* Merchant provided a devastating critique of the mechanistic world view that originated with 17-century science. The mechanistic scientific outlook of such thinkers as Bacon, Descartes and Locke, she demonstrated, was intrinsically connected to the rise of capitalism, the death of the earlier organic world view, and the growing domination over women. In *Ecological Revolutions* she developed a general model of the interaction of production, reproduction and consciousness in the context of specific ecological revolutions, exploring in particular the colonial and capitalist ecological revolutions that took place in New England in the 17th through 19th centuries.

*Radical Ecology*, Merchant's third book on ecology, is a very different kind of work. Rather than resting on detailed historical research and aiming at theoretical synthesis, *Radical Ecology* is clearly intended as an introductory primer on the subject. The goal of the book is obviously not to criticize mainstream ecology nor to chart a course for radical ecology, but rather to explain the diversity of traditions that exist within the latter.

The result is a book that is extremely useful pedagogically, but limited in other respects. There is probably no better introduction currently available to the entire range of discourse within radical ecology. Yet, what is lacking is the full development of Merchant's own important ecosocial vision which would force the reader to choose among various strands within radical ecology, or to transcend them all in the form of a still more meaningful theory and practice. What one finds instead is a textbook approach in which a series of taxonomic boxes are drawn, each one encompassing a different strand within radical ecology.

Unfortunately, some of the broad delineations adopted in the book serve to hinder as much help in the comprehension of the cross-cutting issues of global ecological crisis and the necessary course of ecological change. Part One on "Problems" starts with a chapter on the global ecological crisis and then includes chapters on scientific world views (in which organic and mechanistic outlooks are contrasted) and environmental ethics (in which egocentric, anthropocentric and ecocentric approaches are distinguished). Part Two is concerned with "Thought" and includes separate chapters on "deep ecology," "spiritual ecology" and "social ecology." Part Three is devoted to "Movements" and encompasses chapters on "green politics," "ecofeminism" and "sustainable development."

Such an organizational structure has a certain arbitrariness about it, particularly where a strict distinction is made between "thought" and "movements." It is not immediately clear that ecofeminism or sustainable development should be characterized as "movements" divorced from "thought," any more than deep ecology or social ecology should be seen as "thought" divorced from "movements." Deep ecology has always had a strong link to militant ecological groups like Earth First!. And social ecology is impossible to understand without attention to socialist and anarchist ecological struggles with a very long (if frequently ignored) history. "Sustainable development" in Merchant's treatment becomes a portmanteau category that encompasses tendencies as various as Integrated Pest Management, restoration ecology, bioregionalism, indigenous peoples' movements, and mainstream planning for sustainable economic development along the lines inspired by the Brundtland report. In her classification of environmental ethics (64) Jeremy Bentham and Gifford Pinchot are included in the same category (anthropocentric/utilitarian) as Barry Commoner and Murray Bookchin.

Despite the problematic nature of some of these broad distinctions, Merchant's discussion of each particular strand of ecological thought is succinct and insightful. Although her approach is generally neutral, her more penetrating readers will be able to discern that her own sympathies are chiefly with socialist ecology and socialist ecofeminism. Merchant's

treatment of Marx' and Engels' approach to ecology is excellent as far as it goes, and superior in some respects to her earlier discussion in *Ecological Revolutions*. Yet, she seems to rely unduly on the collection of excerpts contained in Howard Parsons' *Marx and Engels on Ecology* (from which all her references to Marx are taken). Hence Merchant does not seem to appreciate the fact that Marx's famous discussion of the destruction of the soil and the worker, in the section on "Large-Scale Industry and Agriculture" at the end of the chapter on "Machinery and Large-Scale Industry" in Volume I of *Capital*, was not at all an incidental observation but rather a logical result of his whole critique of political economy up to that point. Merchant, however, does a superb job of briefly describing the ecosocialist outlook represented by James O'Connor and the new socialist ecological journal *Capitalism, Nature, Socialism*, highlighting in this context the importance of Marx's concept of conditions of production.

On the relation of ecology to gender, race and Third World struggles Merchant's book is especially useful. Her discussion of ecofeminism, which distinguishes between liberal, cultural and socialist ecofeminism, is undoubtedly the clearest analysis yet written on this subject. She is very careful to include accounts of both struggles against "environmental racism" in the United States, and Third World environmental movements, such as that of the Chipko movement in India and the rubber tappers' resistance led by Chico Mendes in Brazil. Finally, since socialists have often been characterized (unfairly) as indifferent to population issues it is worth noting that Merchant's treatment of this subject, in which she relies heavily on the work of Barry Commoner, is excellent, connecting the population problem in the Third World to the question of demographic transition.

Some of what is best in *Radical Ecology* emerged out of Merchant's own earlier research. At the end of the introduction she provides a diagram of her general model of ecological revolution, as developed in *Ecological Revolutions*, though the explanation given of this model in *Radical Ecology* is too brief to be readily understood. In her critique of the mechanistic scientific world view in chapter 2 she draws on the historical analysis of *The Death of Nature*, in a way that will hopefully lead readers back to that earlier work.

The chief weakness of the book, which seems to derive from limitations inherent in its textbook approach, is the lack of historical definition given to "radical ecology." For Merchant it seems to be any form of thought or movement that rejects egocentric ethics and a mechanistic scientific world view, and which thus demands some kind of ecological revolution in present-day society. For ecological Marxists, however, this answer is bound to be unsatisfactory, since such a broad and sweeping notion of green "radicalism," and the attendant loose conception of ecological revo-

lution, seems to obviate the need for a root and branch (red and green) critique of the contemporary system of production and reproduction. In this sense it appears that Merchant deliberately chose to refrain from developing her own views, deciding instead to adopt a more neutral approach. In some ways this makes the book more useful pedagogically. But it also means that it fails to confront head on many of the larger problems dividing ecological theory and practice today.

JOHN BELLAMY FOSTER

*Department of Sociology  
University of Oregon  
Eugene, OR 97403-1291*



## BOOK NOTE

*Diffusing Power: The Key to Socialist Revival*, by Michael Meacher. London: Pluto Press, 1992. Distributed in the United States by Westview Press. \$49.95; paper, \$19.95. Pp. x, 200.

Michael Meacher is a prominent left-wing politician in Britain. His latest book attempts to articulate a positive socialist vision for the Labour Party that is "relevant and meaningful to the actual modern world." He proposes that democratic socialists must seek to empower individuals to "the maximum feasible extent," but in a way that is compatible with "community and altruistic ends." In developing this rather airy formulation Meacher discusses the role that new forms of training, state regulation, workplace cooperation, and other innovations could play in promoting the democratization of British society and the revitalization of the Labour Party. Extensive reference is made to progressive public policies developed in countries like Germany and Sweden, and to the need to pose a coherent alternative to the pro-capitalist policies of Reagan and Thatcher. Unfortunately, much of the book reads like a collection of long-winded speeches. For example, toward the text's conclusion Meacher says that "the left's ideology . . . must be, and be seen to be, a vision that releases new forces in society, unlocks individual and group energies now pent up, and unleashes hidden talents." Rather than expanding his theme into a book-length manuscript, the substance of his remarks could have been boiled down to a two-page article in the *New Statesman*.

KENT WORCESTER

*Social Science Research Council  
605 Third Avenue  
New York, NY 10158*