I often hear people arguing about the world’s many evils and which should be the first confronted. This fragmentary approach is itself part of the problem, reflecting the linear, hierarchical nature of patriarchal thinking that fails to grasp the complexity of living systems. What is needed is a perspective that integrates the many problems we face and approaches them holistically.


Ecofeminists draw upon deep ecological theory to the extent that they conceptualize human relations with “nature” as a form of domination. They also provide a version of social ecology in which the domination of nature is interrelated to intra-human social hierarchy and difference based on gender, race and class amongst other formations. Ecofeminism can be seen as a paradigm for the tracing of interrelations between different formations of domination based on difference. This chapter outlines key strands and themes within ecofeminist thought, and argues for a different framework for ecofeminist theory based on an understanding of complex systems. I suggest that ecofeminism needs to engage more fully with debates on the efficacy of patriarchy, and to be rather more generous toward deep and some socialist ecologies with respect to their analyses of capitalism and anthropocentrism as systemic relations of domination.

From the early years of the “second wave,” some feminists were suggesting that environmental degradation was a matter for feminist theory. Feminist involvement in anti-militarist politics and a plethora of environmental issues indicated that in praxis, activists were already engaging with these matters in feminist ways. As a body of social theory,
ecofeminism has followed Simone de Beauvoir’s suggestion that women have a particular affinity with the natural world due to their common exploitation by men (Mellor 1992:51). Unlike de Beauvoir however, all the differing ecofeminisms have argued for the positive revaluation of the connection between women and nature (Plumwood 1993:8–9).

Victoria Davion (1994:8) suggests there are two strands of ecofeminist theory, but that one strand is distinguished by being “eco-feminine” and thereby not feminist. Chris Cuomo distinguishes “eco-feminism” which is primarily concerned with the similarities among the “objects” (such as women, animals) of oppressive thought and action (1998:6), and “ecological feminism,” which focuses on the links between forms and instances of oppression (1998:7). Cuomo overstates this difference and in the work of individual theorists both are usually attended to. Mary Mellor describes the difference in terms of “social” and “affinity” explanations of women’s relationship to nature (1992:51–2), and these are the terms I tend to use. I do consider this division rather arbitrary however. Affinity and social ecofeminisms have many common concerns, including violence against women and often against animals, women’s health, the gendered division of labor in production systems and the household. They have questioned forms of social inequity resulting from the exploitative relations between rich and poor countries, and see human domination of the environment as related to a worldview that justifies the domination of women.

The difference between social and affinity ecofeminists is the latter’s emphasis on spirituality, and the physical bodily experiences of women, which encourage identification with “nature.” Social ecofeminists tend to focus on ecofeminist ethics and engage more closely with green social and political theory. Affinity ecofeminists are most closely related to radical feminism and tend to see patriarchy as responsible for our currently destructive relationship to the earth (Leyland 1983:72). They have developed theoretical links between feminism and ecology with specific reference to sexuality, motherhood and reproduction, warfare, and male violence. This writing has been criticized as essentialist, for apparent allusion to the particular knowledge, emotion, sensuality, thought and morality of women (Segal 1987). Within ecofeminism itself, some have accepted the “straw woman” as a means of distinguishing their own work as non-essentialist. There is merit however, in the range of ecofeminist approaches and the allegations of essentialism, are, more often than not, based on cursory readings, de-contextualization and attribution. Critiques of ecofeminism are often startling examples of academic foul play. This said, most of the approaches discussed are