

## **Intellectuals and militants: possibilities of dialogue<sup>1</sup>**

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### **ABSTRACT**

The purpose of this article is to explain the concept of Nature that grounds the ideas and actions of the Peasant Women's Movement, and to propose means for dialogue between militants and intellectuals. The paper duly takes into account that, while academic feminism is strongly influenced by deconstructionist lines of thought, farming women sustain the idea, based on a deeply religious vision, of a natural identification between women and Nature. In pointing out possibilities of dialogue, the paper underlines the importance of schools of thought connected with the sociology of comprehension.

**Keywords:** Farming Women's Movement, Feminism, Gender, Family Farming

### **RESUMO**

O objetivo do artigo é explicitar o conceito de natureza que dá substrato às ideias e às ações do Movimento de Mulheres Camponesas - MMC, procurando refletir sobre as possibilidades de diálogo entre militantes e intelectuais, levando-se em conta que, enquanto o feminismo acadêmico tem forte influência das correntes desconstrucionistas, as mulheres agricultoras conservam o pressuposto da identificação entre natureza e feminino, tendo por base uma visão profundamente religiosa. Nas possibilidades de diálogo, é levantada a importância de correntes ligadas à sociologia da compreensão.

**Palavras-Chave:** movimento de mulheres agricultoras; feminismo; gênero; agricultura familiar.

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<sup>1</sup> Traduzido por Taís Blauth

## Introduction

The goals of this article can be summarized as follows: a) to show, by means of a brief historical review, that the concept of Nature is a construction varying in time, space and social group; b) to determine which particular constructions of the natural world ground the ideas and actions of the Peasant Women's Movement (MMC), as opposed to those that are adopted by academic scholars concerned with feminism; and c) to build bridges between the different understandings of the human and non-human world for an unprejudiced dialogue.

Anyone who has followed the Peasant Women's Movement (former Rural Women Workers' Movement) in Southern Brazil over the last years can see that its concern with healthy nutrition and food sovereignty has conspicuously grown.

In 2004, the year in which several autonomous women's movements gathered in Brasilia and decided to merge into a single organization - the MMC, covering 16 Brazilian states<sup>2</sup> - a document was released which retrieved several of the militants' flagship causes dating back to the time of the emergence of the Farming Women's Movement in Santa Catarina (MMA/SC) in 1983 (which in 1995 became associated with the MMTR and has since 2004 has been part of the MMC, in turn affiliated to Via Campesina).<sup>3</sup>

The militant history of the MMA/SC has been marked by the organized action of farming women. It includes women leaving the house to thinking about their own fates, the recognition of the Farm Worker profession, education and training of women leaders and women in general regarding their own rights, demands for access to public, quality healthcare and welfare rights (retirement, sickness, accident and disability benefits, maternity and bereavement pay), and the fight for a new agro-ecological farming project to recover creole seeds and popular wisdom as a way of preserving biodiversity (MMC: 2004).

Concern for agro-ecology among farming women makes it possible that their movement be classified under eco-feminism, though this is not a term frequently used by these militants. Maria Luisa Femenías's concept of ecofeminism (2003: p. 233), cited by M. Cristina Spadaro and M. Luisa Femenías (2004, p. 233), according to which the way we treat the environment has much to do with the way we view women. So ecological feminism is rooted in a wide variety of feminist schools of thought (liberal, Marxist, radical, socialist, dark or third-world feminism), but differs from them by its insistence that non-human nature is a feminist issue. By extending feminist criticism to Nature it allows us to assess the disguises and intersections that exist between all forms of domination.

When we say that what characterizes ecofeminism is the assumption that non-human nature is a feminist issue, it might be asked if the MMC considers itself, or can be considered, to be a feminist movement. Due to the association or "mark of origin" of feminist movements which connects it with white, Western, middle-class women, the militants of popular movements have certain reservations about declaring themselves feminist. Nonetheless, the theme of a recent MMC meeting held in Xaxim-SC on August 21 – 23, 2010, was "Peasant Woman and Feminism". This shows a rapprochement between peasant and feminist women movements, though clearly there are

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<sup>2</sup> Although the MMC is wide-reaching and speaks in the name of Brazil's farming women, there is in the Northeast a group of autonomous movements that has not adhered to the unification proposed in 2004 and has remained grouped under the name Rural Workers' Movement of the Northeast (MMTR-NE). According to Caroline Araújo Bordalo, in Brazil "there are today two articulations of 'independent' women, the MMTR-NE and the MMC". The author conducts an interesting analysis of the different forces, institutions and motivations that have come together to form these two organizations (see BORDALO: 2007: p. 5). That said, it must be made clear that the present article deals only with the MMC, which is more solid in the South of the country.

<sup>3</sup> The organization was formed in May 1993 during the 1st Conference of the Via Campesina held in Belgium. The second conference took place in 1996 in Mexico; the third in 2000 in India; and the fourth in 2004 in Sao Paulo. Via Campesina is an international organization seeking to promote solidarity and union between peasant organizations, farm workers, farming women, and indian and negro communities in Asia, Africa, America and Europe. Among its main goals is to defend food sovereignty, or peoples' right to decide over their farming and food policies ([www.viacampesina.org](http://www.viacampesina.org)).

still reservations on the part of the women at the base of the movement. As for the term “ecofeminist”, rejection was expressed from as high as the movement’s leadership.

Despite the wide range of positions, the term feminist can at least be defined by one common denominator: belief in the importance of women in the transformation of a world where they are treated as inferior beings. In this sense, the MMC may indeed be considered to be feminist, and its concern for the environment to be proof that ecofeminism is at least one of its facets.

When we speak of ecofeminism and its several trends, one point is pivotal: compared with men, are women closer to Nature? Positive and negative answers to this question have triggered intense debates. Thinkers such as Vandana Shiva and Maria Mies (1997) are world-renown for defending an essential connection between women and Nature, whereas a significant number of feminists not only deny this connection but fear that belief in a bond held as innate may reinforce widespread, discriminatory views of women’s intellectual inferiority. For feminists of this orientation, what society considers to be feminine is a social construction that legitimates gender domination. For them, the first type of feminists is “essentialist” in the sense that they believe in an immutable, “feminine essence” (PAULILO, 2007).

In regard to the woman/Nature binomial, it is interesting to see how the schools of thought that see the notion of woman (and for that matter of man too) as being socially constructed to a greater or lesser extent also deconstruct to varying degrees what is considered as feminine and masculine. Some reach extreme positions, such as Judith Butler with her “queer” theory according to which not only gender, but sex itself, is constructed. For her, the representation of what is understood as matter (Nature, body, subject, etc.) precedes matter itself because matter is regulated by the discourse that creates it which and moreover naturalizes the construction (FEMÍNIAS e SPADARO, 2004: p. 237). However, the notion of Nature is less discussed - what is Nature? Even thinkers who advocate a deep relationship between women and Nature, perhaps because of it, take Nature to be “given”, “stable” (at least in its profound laws ) and, above all, “wise”.

Nonetheless, a brief historical review of the different philosophies of Nature that have guided the understanding of what is “natural” along the centuries is enough to dismantle this presumed stability.

## 1. Is there anything natural in Nature?

Aristotle (384 b. C. – 322 b. C.) sustained Nature to be a principle and a cause. It was a principle in relation to phenomena that were self-determined and concerned with preservation and/or reproduction. Implied here is a sense of finishing, of self-sufficiency or indeed perfection, that was not present in what he considered to be the products of technique. Nature was a cause in relation to the types of change that led a being to completion. Since it is the notion of finishing, of completion, that takes central place in Aristotle’s philosophy of Nature, in such a way that a natural being and its form are viewed as identical, the ensuing tendency for preservation and persistence carries in its core the notion of “essence”, of that which remains and defines the thing in question (Angioni, 2004). From this notion derives the term “essentialist”, used to describe any concept that is based on something considered “natural” in the sense of “immutable”, permanent.

Philosopher Luc Ferry (2007, p. 38-39, italics by the author) clarifies this idea of completion by observing that the simplest way to understand the *cosmos* of Greek philosophers “is to imagine the whole universe as an *organized and animated* being”. This ordered structure is what they called “divine” (*theion*), and it “has nothing of a personal God, but gets confused with the order of the world”. There was no exterior Being outside the universe, as Jews and Christians believed. The idea of a God as “creator of all” is widespread out in Europe as a consequence of Christian hegemony.

During the high middle ages, Nature was thought to be there to be contemplated rather than explained (Rossatto, 2004). According to Hugh of Saint Victor (*apud* Le Goff and Schmitt, 2006, p. 263, italics by the authors), “like the Scripture, Nature is a book *written by God’s hand*”. This view derived from the conception of the cosmos as something swathed in sacredness, that is, of Nature as the direct expression of divine will (*Id. Id.:* p.264). The earth in medieval times was still seen as the

center of the universe, as Ptolemy (90 -168) had proposed hundreds of years before. Between the 12<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> centuries, due to a new economic and political context, translations of Greek and Arab works produced before or outside the Christian tradition began to sprout, particularly in Southern Italy and Spain. Within a hundred years, works on physics, astronomy, alchemy and magic had been translated, revealing the richness of Aristotelian, Hellenistic and Arab thought and creating the appropriate setting for the rise of more rational ideas. One of such ideas was that Nature was external to the sphere of the sacred. English philosopher Adelard of Barth (1.080 – 1.152) retrieved from Arab thinkers the idea of “reason” to oppose that of a direct relationship between natural phenomena and God’s will. A search for the causes of these phenomena then began, unattached to religion.

The Aristotelian-Ptolemaic view of the world lasted until the 17th century, when Western thought underwent drastic transformations. For Luc Ferry (2007, p.116 ), in less than 15 decades between the 16th and 17th centuries, Europe saw a scientific revolution without precedent in the history of humanity, and it marked a sharp and radical turn. Among the works that contributed to the consolidation of the new world view was Galileo Galilei’s 1632 thesis, “Dialogue Concerning the Two Chief World Systems”. Albertino L. Gallina (2004; p. p.31) says Galileo showed great persistence in building a Science that opened the way for the rational knowledge of Nature, a way of thinking that drove him to his subsequent altercations with the Inquisition. For Gallina, this knowledge could only be accessed by means of mathematical language, but it was Descartes, he says, who succeeded in establishing the foundations on which Mathematics was able to build a discourse on Nature.

French philosopher, physicist and mathematician René Descartes (1596-1650) saw Nature as a great machine that could be reduced to quantities. He considered the material world and, therefore, bodies in general, as machines. Things had no intrinsic power, as in Aristotle’s notion of essence. To explain the facts of the physical world, he advocated the need for principles that were external to the bodies involved. The causes of phenomena were not important; it was the laws governing the functioning of the world that mattered. To better understand “Descartian mechanicality” we must, before criticizing it with today’s eyes, understand the amount of wonder with which Europeans of the 17<sup>th</sup> century saw machines (Gallina, 2004, p. 28 and following). In fact “bewilderment” may be a better word. As Ferry explains (2007, p. 117 and following), as modern physics developed it put all the principles of Christianity in question, so that the universe lost harmony with the *cosmos* and humanity faced *chaos*.

To find a new consistency, some sense in the world, it was necessary that “human being itself, in this case the wise man, introduce order in a universe that, at first sight, offers none” (Ferry, 2007, p. 122). Still according to the author, modern philosophy proved to be up to the challenge with the release of Kant’s *Critique of Pure Reason* (1781). The world entered the era of “humanism”, that is, the era in which man found himself alone (Id.Ibid., p. 117). Man was at the center of knowledge and, therefore, Kant proposed not a philosophy of Nature, but a philosophy of the knowledge of Nature. To him, if Nature meant the existence of things in themselves, we would not be able to know it either *a priori* or *a posteriori* (Hamn, 2004).

“Humanism”, however, did not mean “humanity”, but “men”. Women would wait a long time before feminist governments began fighting for their introduction, under equal conditions, into the world of “human beings”. As Roberto Romano (1987: p. 125) puts it, “the same Kant who defended the brave departure of humanity from its childish, minor status, maintained the latter for women”. To illustrate this, he cites an extract where the 18<sup>th</sup> century philosopher defines women’s statute in society:

Two persons convening at random is insufficient for the unity and indissolubility of a union; one partner must **yield** to the other and, in turn, one must be superior to the other in some way, in order to be able to rule over or govern him. (...) The man must be superior to the woman through his physical power and courage, while the woman must be superior to the man through her natural talent for mastering his desire for her. (KANT *apud* ROMANO: 1987, p. 126, emphasis by the author).

Kant was not alone among the great philosophers who affirmed women's inferiority. Alongside Plato, Kierkegaard and Schopenhauer was Hegel (1770-1831) who, in his *Philosophy of Right*, said:

Women may be educated, but they are not made for the higher sciences, for philosophy, and for certain arts which require universality. Women may have thought, taste, elegance, but the Ideal is not accessible to them (...). When women are in charge of government, the state is in danger, for their actions are based not on the demands of universality but on contingent inclination and opinion (...). (HEGEL *apud* ROMANO: p. 126 and 131)

If women are distant from the Ideal and the Universal, how can they possibly be included as equal to men in big concepts such as Man, Humanity and Humanism? Doctor in Philosophy Rosa Maria Rodríguez Magda (2007) extends the criticism to more recent philosophers. Beginning with Nietzsche's clear, recognizable misogyny, she criticizes writers considered as post-modern, pointing for instance to the absence of studies on women in Foucault's *History of Sexuality* (though she recognizes the author's importance in feminist thought), to Deleuze's negligence of the sexual difference in his notion of body, to Baudrillard's view of the "feminine" as a pure artifice built from male-based ritual, and so forth.

Going back to the concept of Nature, we can now see that a review not of thinkers, but of epochs, evidences the concept's transitory character.

Thomas Kesselring (2000) identifies five distinct phases in his review of the concept of Nature along the history of Western thought: Greek Antiquity, Middle Ages, first stage of Modernity, second stage of Modernity (19<sup>th</sup> cent. and beginning of 20<sup>th</sup> cent.) and last decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. He observes that the concepts and ideas he encounters, though widely varied, would be much more diverse had oriental and indigenous cultures been considered in the analysis.

According to Kesselring (2000, p. 158), Nature in the Middle Ages was viewed as the work of God's goodness and wisdom. It therefore acquired a normative character which gave birth to the discussion of natural right. Without this previous idea of natural right, the modern concept of human rights would not have emerged, since these are rights that every human being is, "by Nature", entitled to, and are therefore innate and inalienable.

This elucidates why the religious conception of Nature is so proficuous for social movements seeking equality and equity for women and men, rich and poor, humanity and Nature. After all Nature is normative as well as divine, and this implies that all of God's creations are equal as much as have the right to exist and must therefore be respected, loved and protected. As a consequence, we humans must see equality as "a natural right" since it derives from Nature, which is divine – God's work.

Only a perfect, and therefore utopian, society might be able to contemplate everything and everyone in such a way that nothing needed should lack, whether material needs such as clothing, food and shelter, or immaterial values such as respect, spirituality and solidarity. This utopia is confirmed by Allie van der Schaaf's (2001) in his study of women's search for social rights and gender equality within the Farming Women's Movement of Rio Grande do Sul:

The movement craves for a utopian "milk and honey" society inspired on Liberation Theology, with which it combines elements of theological feminism. To recover the "milk and honey" society, capitalism/neo-liberalism must be fought (...), and essential values must be reintroduced into human life – dignity, equality, solidarity, justice and pleasure – by means of spiritual, religious experience. Farming women have a crucial role in this recovery of "life", as they are partners of fertility, both of human beings and the earth. (SCHAAF, 2001; 164)<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Liberation Theology is a theological current uniting diverse Christian churches. It was developed from the 1970s in Third-World countries and the periphery of developed countries. Based on the option for the poor, it supports the poor

Schaaf thus allows us to grasp the symbolism contained in the act of one participant of a rural women's meeting in Brazil: pregnant, she appeared with her belly covered in glued-on seeds. The speech of D. Adélia Schmitz, one of the national leaders of the peasant women movement, reaffirms the connection between women, life and Nature.

(...) because monoculture kills biodiversity; in a Eucalyptus forest not even ants grow, the earth is killed! Life is killed! The earth is alive. Not even a bee, no animals go to these trees. And what about biodiversity? The amount of water these eucalyptuses absorb from the soil! We, women, defend life and want the future generations to also have worthy life conditions. The social function of the earth is to produce food. (Adélia Schmitz, 2007)<sup>5</sup>

But it is not only farming women who consider the acts of planting, harvesting and giving birth to new human beings as the main pillars of survival on Earth, and therefore associate women with a normative nature that is grounded on equality and free access to human rights.

Renown French obstetrician Michel Odent (2002), in his book *The farmer and the obstetrician*, establishes a vital connection between the acts of planting and expecting a child, drawing a parallel between the industrialization of agriculture and the industrialization of labor, when he affirms that the main difference between the two processes is that disasters such as mad-cow disease, the spread of foot and mouth disease in cattle and the indiscriminate use of pesticides have alerted humanity to the risks involved in food production, while the same time humanity is blind to the dangers posed by the new birthgiving technologies. When we read ecofeminist Vandana Shiva's account (1997) of how she left a hospital where doctors wanted her to undergo a cesarean surgery to go in search of another where she could deliver naturally, we can see the similarity of thought between the two thinkers, despite their different backgrounds.

Despite the positive contribution the association between women and Nature has given the fight for equality and rights, there is always the risk that, by yielding to it, we may be reinforcing the view that women are inferior because they are closer to Nature, which is not divine, but the object of man's action and domination. As Kesselring (2000, p. 161) puts it, man himself began to shift away from the medieval notion that he was placed "within Nature", having been "created by God", to assume a position outside Nature, conceiving himself, in an almost divinized way, to be its "owner". Nature, previously divine, thus became the object of man's science and manipulation.

Thomas Kesselring masterfully explains the moment in which man drew this separation between Nature, human reason and the physical world. There is only one amendment to make: men broke away from Nature alone, leaving women behind. The word "Man", written with capital M as in Kesselring's writing, should mean humanity as a whole, but as we have shown and the feminists have so brilliantly denounced, it is used to refer to men alone. So Nature as it relates with women may be either divinized or leveled with the physical aspect of the world, or man's animal side. It is this second idea that discourages even Christian feminists from adopting the woman-Nature identification. Ivone Gebara, one of Brazil's first ecofeminist theologians, is explicit when she says:

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in the fight against poverty and disregard of social rights. It first emerged in Latin America and, in its search for a view of inequality in light of Christian faith, was influenced by the Social Sciences and in particular by some Marxist currents.

<sup>5</sup> During one debate, my colleague prof. David J. Caume made an interesting remark. He observed that the above quote can be understood as a political manifestation as much as a religion-based discourse. We did not disagree, since religion and politics were indeed closely intertwined in the movements that stemmed from Liberation Theology. According to Carlos Sell (2004), Liberation theology is permeable to the different critical currents of today's society. Because it is grounded on the Catholic tradition, it is critical of modernity. Because it is based also on the Marxist tradition, it is modern. And because it incorporates mystical and ecological traditions, it has a post-modern side.

So ecofeminism, or at least the ecofeminism I work with, does not in any way want to reinforce the connection between women and Nature, but rather to, precisely, denounce it as the product of a rationalistic, patriarchal system where the masculine is leveled with reason and the feminine with Nature, as if we were inferior beings. And it is this association that has created philosophical, anthropological and, evidently, social distortions (GEBARA *apud* LÓPEZ: 2001; 79/80).

From our continuous relationship with militants of the peasant women's movement we can see that their critical position - the result of their life as farmers, of their watching the degradation of the environment and their knowledge of the risks involved in the use of pesticides - is backed by the traditional religious idea of a strong connection between women and Nature. I say "religious" because their belief comes not from reading the essentialist feminists, like Vandana Shiva, but from their view of life and Nature as "God's gifts" – indeed, most began their militant life in churches. And I say "traditional" because this idea does not incorporate Ivone Gebara's criticisms.

Comparing the view of philosophers who consider the woman inferior to the man because of her proximity to the "animal", "savage", or "instinctive" world, with the religious conception of Nature defended by farming women, we can clearly see where the difference lies. While, to the first, the closer one gets to the non-human world, the more inferior one becomes, to the latter, the more one "rises up" towards God's perfect work: Nature. Not only is the concept of woman different but so is that of Nature, hence the reason why so much space has been dedicated in this paper to show the different human conceptions of the non-human world.

The creation of public policies emphasizing the traditional feminine role came as a breath of fresh air to the woman/Nature association. Of these, we can easily cite two: the Family Grant Program (Programa Bolsa Familia) and support given to organic production projects, creole seeds, medicinal herbs and healthy nourishing. Of the two, the Family Grant Program is now visibly the most consolidated. It will therefore be used here as an example.

When studying poverty-fighting policies in the city of Londrina, Silvana A. Mariano and Cássia M. Carloto (2009: p. 902) came to conclusions that are applicable to the whole of the country. According to them, because the majority of the Program's beneficiaries are women-mothers, it "develops mechanisms that reinforce the traditional association between women and motherhood and the chores implied in the classic reproductive sphere". And they add that such programs "contribute to turning 'woman' and 'mother' into equivalent categories. The strategy of the inclusion and interpellation of women presupposes the following ideological operation: women=mother or family=mother".<sup>6</sup>

If, traditionally, the association between women and motherhood was enough to confine women to the home, leaving them financially dependent on their husbands, a new fact cannot be ignored: the emergence of public policies that benefit women because they are mothers.

From what has been said, we can see that the feminist disapproval of gender inequality and desire to overcome it is not enough to render men's and women's worldviews compatible. While, for some, the category "woman" is something given, is an invariant, others need a definition of which women are being talked about. The greatest risk facing the fight for equity is not the existence of differences, but the likelihood that these differences may prevent dialogue.

In this article, our greatest concern is to establish a dialogue between researchers and the researched, and for this reason we have looked for inspiration and substance in some strands of comprehensive sociology.

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<sup>6</sup> Though we can disagree with the incorporation of a traditional view of women into public policies, we cannot deny the role the Family Allowance Program has taken in reducing poverty. As Steven M. Helfand and Mauro E. Del Rossi (2008) explain in regard to poverty-reduction in the Brazilian rural environment between 1995 and 2006, while agriculture was responsible for 16% of that reduction, the Family Allowance Program was responsible for 19%. We, the feminists, do not want the withdrawal of benefits that improve the harsh life conditions of low-income women, but we dream of the day in which men will take on the caretaking of children and the elderly alongside women.

## 2. Deconstruction, construction and battle flags

As a researcher and feminist militant, I must confess to a certain amount of discomfort regarding the fact that the peasant women militants' firm essentialist convictions are not echoed by my own, which are much closer to deconstructivist notions. Insofar as I am moved by the same ideals of equality and preservation of Nature of women farmers, at first I thought sharing their beliefs would be easy, and any belief they might have that gave them motivation to press for new rights would be welcome, but that was not so. But what to make of the researcher in me? How should I position myself epistemologically in relation to something I considered an impasse? Evidently there would be no impasse if I believed it enough to "let the oppressed speak" as was well accepted in the 1980s - the decade of social movements, but which today receives well-founded criticism.<sup>7</sup>

When I speak of deconstructionism, I agree with Linda M. G. Zerilli (2008, p. 14) that what is in question here is not the discarding of the category "woman", but a notion of "woman" whose behavior derives more from her life experiences than a "feminine essence". To the author, realizing the plurality where before there was singularity is an achievement of the feminist movement itself rather than of its critics. Feminism is a political movement that aims to unite women in a fight for freedom, shunning precisely that naturalized femininity that is based on a common identity to all women. Instead of voluntarily destroying the category of women, thinkers such as Judith Butler, Chantal Mouffe and Joan Scott seek to clarify, in critical rather than nostalgic terms, the political consequences of this historical loss for the future of feminism.

Still according to the author (ZERILLI; 2008; p. 15/16), the fact that a tradition has come to an end is not reason enough for traditional values to lose power over people. To the contrary, these values may become even more influential for the simple fact that a confusing orientation is more attractive than the absolute lack of one. For PAULILO (2009), the danger of a "confusing orientation" is often that it may give a false impression of homogeneity, of consensus, leading to a lack of dialogue which, in the case of unresolved disagreements, may produce a first reaction of rupture and mutual accusations. The most common accusations are of "authoritarianism" by some group, against "political delay" or "traditionalism" by its opponent.

How, then, do we prepare for dialogue? Little by little (not without labor pains), and inspired by the following authors - Argawal; Joan Scott, Clifford Geertz and Giddens - I dropped the impasse. Though I knew these writers, some rather well, I had never put them together in a concrete research situation.

It was Argawal (1994) who raised the idea of an ecology of the quotidian. She studied several regions in India and showed the relationship between the defense of forest preservation and the daily life of poor rural families whose survival depended, strongly, on what they collected in those non-harvested areas. In this same line, Patrícia L. Howard's field research studies (2003) reveal the enormous importance of forests, even when they are restricted to small preserved or even abandoned areas, in the daily nourishment of poor families around the globe, including those living in rich countries like the US. The amount and density of the data presented in these two works reinforce the idea that the environment is indeed women's business, as the feminists say. However, both works portray the environment as provider of relief for immediate needs, such as hunger and disease (through food and medicinal herbs). No concern is shown for the mystic or spiritual sphere, that is, people's relationship with Nature, an aspect that Iraildes C. Torres (2009) emphasizes in her study of women farmers and fishers in Amazon.

Like Bina Argawal, Iraildes Torres affirms that women have a less destructive and more zealous type of relationship with the environment because they depend on it daily to feed their

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<sup>7</sup> See, among others, Ruth Cardoso (1986)



families. She also underlines the important role of beliefs and myths as mediators of this relationship, without discarding its normative character. So for instance indigenous religiosity is viewed as having the same function as a source of norms and values as the Christian notion of Nature we spoke about earlier.

In traditional Amazon communities, the foundations of life and death, everyday actions, work and social relations are based on symbolism. Men and women base their relations with bountiful Nature on mythological values, without losing sight of the laws of the national State. The speech (of one interviewee) shows her concern both with the law that forbids fishing during the fish's reproductive period, and with the "mother of water" who exerts supernatural powers to reorient life in the rivers. (...) The myth has normative and consultive functions, and spins the 'wheel' of the triangle man-woman/Nature/society in a relation of interdependence. (TORRES; 2009, p. 352)

The fact that at the root of religions, whether Indigenous, Hindu or Western, is the way men and women see Nature and the world does not imply a homogeneity among all people of the same religious belief. If women care for Nature in ways that are different than men's, studies show that such difference is the result of women's and men's particular quotidian experiences. And this leads us to Joan Scott's theoretical considerations (1999).

In "Experience", Scott brings forth the idea that it is "not individuals who have experience, but subjects who are constituted through experience" (1999: p. 27). There is no predetermined arrival point; experience forms identities and world views that, as History shows, are in constant mutation. How the social groups, among them women, see each other has to do with the type of experience they have. Scott's work emphasizes the need to draw on hermeneutic currents to understand the importance of "comprehension" as a key element for the intelligibility of social practices. This is even more so because, as we saw, these experiences are mediated by strong religious beliefs, which, most often than not, the researcher does not share.

Clifford Geertz and Anthony Giddens alert researchers not to delude themselves about their identification with the group under study, no matter how much sympathy they may feel for the ideas of its members. In *O Saber Local* (Local Knowledge), Geertz (2003) differentiates between "close experience" and "distant experience". He distrusts the researcher's ability to "get into someone else's shoes":

To grasp concepts that express other people's close experience, and to do so in such efficient manner that an enlightening connection can be established with the concepts of distant experience created by theorists to capture the most general aspects of social life is, undoubtedly, a task as delicate, though a little less mysterious, as placing oneself 'in someone else's shoes'. The trick is to not become involved in any type of internal spiritual empathy with one's informers. Like any one of us they too prefer to consider their souls as their own (...) (GEERTZ, 2003; 88)

My agreement with the author's view that, to understand social life, one must "make an enlightening connection with the concepts of distant experience created by theorists" has to do with my sympathy for Gaston Bachelard's idea (1974) of an "epistemological cut" between common sense and science: while common sense moves from the real to the theoretical, science moves from the theoretical to the real. This agreement with the author does not stop me from being far from his ultra-rationalism. It does not matter here that both common sense and the real are constructed; what matters is that they are different constructions. I do not defend that science, common sense and literature are equivalent forms of thought because all three are interpretations. They are based on different parameters and what makes the difference in Science is each theory's own validation form. To bring everything together, ignoring the particularity of each strand of knowledge, would be so impoverishing as to separate them rigidly.

Finally, Anthony Giddens (1978) reinforces and clarifies my convictions when he says that the relativist position begins with a universal postulation – “everything is relative” – and only ends with the discovery that all knowledge moves in circles, and that, to overcome the judgemental relativism, a distinction must be made between meaning and reference in relation to the frameworks of significance. Giddens retrieves the importance of the researcher building his theory and concepts (rather than totally submitting to the speech of the researched) when he says that the Social Sciences can legitimately employ concepts that are not necessarily familiar to those to whom they refer<sup>8</sup>.

## Final Remarks

Clearly the first part of this article is more investigational and analytical, while the second holds more personal reflections and dilemmas. If I have kept them together it is because my experience as a professor, advisor and militant has shown me that the difficulties I have encountered are not exclusive to me. While feminism has a strong urban character, rural sociology has been only limitedly aware of the sexist roots behind the concepts of “rural family” and “rural work”. Add to that multifarious currents of Ecology and you will soon realize that Ecofeminism is a field of forces which, though as yet little known, carries enough elements to create tension and clashes. If this strand of feminism is not so strong in Brazil as in other countries, it is nonetheless increasing in visibility. Even when one of the terms is refuted – either feminism or ecology – the experience of some militant groups has shown a rapprochement taking place between the two greatest social movements of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. It would be too optimistic to think that such a marriage might be effected without tensions and impasses, but to not attempt it would be an act of a priori pessimism. We women are in a rush, it is true, because inequality has oppressed us for so many years. But if our militancy does not progress side by side with efforts of understanding, reflection and dialogue, the pluralism achieved by feminism may become simple fragmentation, placing feminism a long distance away from multiplicity.

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