

An Ecofeminist and Marxist Analysis on the Bolivian Declaration for the Rights of Mother Earth

**Ninni Susan Thomas
Prakhar Bhardwaj**

The Declaration and Its Background

It was around the time of the first anniversary of the British Petroleum oil spill, twenty fifth anniversary of the Chernobyl disaster and when radiation levels around the Fukushima nuclear plant in Japan remained high that Latin American countries like Bolivia took the initiative in adopting legal measures to grant rights to the nature. The Andean nation of Bolivia has been known to strictly follow Marxist policies and in practicality, been more responsive to democratic dialogue, as epitomized in the declaration on the Right to Water. Small-scale and indigenous farmers started a movement that has culminated in the formation of one of the most avant-garde environmental laws in global history. A World People's Conference on Climate Change and the Rights of Mother Earth was called by the President Evo Morales from 19-24 April 2010, after the impasse the COP15 Accord faced. An unprecedented number of 35,000 people joined the Conference in Cochabamba, Bolivia (Sandberg, 2010).

The Declaration and then the Law of the Rights of Mother Earth which was passed by the Bolivian Assembly in December 2010 enumerates seven specific rights to Mother Nature and its ecosystems: -right to life, clean air, equilibrium, diversity of life, clean water, restoration, live free of contamination. This anthropocentric model that gives antecedence to augmentation of profits than to the well-being of the general public spawns environmental destruction and fails to see the interconnection between nature and human life. After having been ratified by other countries like Ecuador and by the United Nations, this has snowballed into grandiose proportions.

As the Declaration states, "Mother Earth is a living dynamic system made up of the undivided community of all living beings, who are all interconnected, interdependent and complementary, sharing a common destiny." This exemplifies how the law greatly is drawn from indigenous concepts that beholds Mother Nature or *Pachamama* as a sacred home, something with which we primarily share a symbiotic relationship with.

The Declaration entails an ecological reorientation of Bolivia's society and economy¹, as it requires all existing laws to tailor themselves to the Declaration and confirm to the ecological limits set by nature. It asks for public policy to depend on living in harmony with nature rather than on the consumerist practices followed.

The Declaration would need the government to metamorphosize from non-renewable to renewable energy; to develop indicators that would record the ecological impact from every economic activity; to invest in research and practice of energy efficiency; to reduce and regulate greenhouse emissions; and to make every company and individual accountable for environmental contamination with the responsibility of restoring the impaired environments.

The Declaration has affixed the culpability of climate change to the developed nations and has placed the onus on them to help restore impaired parts of nature, assume costs for developing countries to arise from loss of development opportunities, and to account for the migration caused due to drastic climate change.

Introduction to Ecofeminism and Marx's View of Ecology

“The Capitalist system has imposed on us a logic of competition, progress and limitless growth ... We confront the terminal crisis of a civilizing model that is patriarchal and based on submission and destruction of human beings and nature... Humanity confronts a great dilemma: to continue on the path of capitalism, depredation and death or to choose the path of harmony with nature and respect for life ...”

- People's Agreement of Cochamambaⁱⁱ

Being a declaration on the Rights of Mother Earth, the draft resolution presented at the UNⁱⁱⁱ does not explicitly talk of either a Marxist political background or the ecofeminism of “Mother Earth”. But understanding the origin of ideology helps understand its implication and meanings when applied to larger contexts and diverse variables. It is today a truism to say that movements are influenced by their social milieu (David Pepper, 2003, P.4); The Declaration and the Agreement make it evident that it would not discuss the problem of climate change without “questioning the cause, which is the capitalist system”.^{iv} Unlike the technocentric and reformist outlook adopted by the COP15, the Declaration projects the Rights of Mother Earth as an end in itself. The common idea of ecocentrism in rejecting the anthropocentric notion of nature resonates with Marx's materialistic concept of nature (John Bellamy Foster, 2000, P.9) inherent in his concept of alienation of man from nature, which is historically explained. Moreover Bolivia having a left wing government, it would be interesting to note how mainstream Marxist thought influences ecological policy.

An ecofeminist analysis of the Declaration is also warranted for the same reason- the declaration talks about “mother earth” thereby implicitly affirming the primary position of the “feminine principle” in ecology. Moreover, the declaration is drafted by Vandana Shiva,^v a pioneer of ecofeminist (Vandana Shiva, 1988) and the influence of the ideologue on the declaration is also worth consideration.

Ecofeminism: Some Fundamentals and Perspectives

Ecofeminism was first used by Eaubonne in 1974 (Francoise d'Eaubonne, 1974) but greatly extrapolated in its scope by Karren Warren, who gave the four core postulates which still largely followed in part - (1) The important connections between oppression of women and nature; (2) understanding the nature of these connections is necessary to any adequate understanding of the oppression of women and the oppression of nature; (3) feminist theory and practice must include an ecological perspective; and (4) solutions to ecological problems must include a feminist perspective (Warren, 1987). Although ecofeminism studies a range of women/environment interconnectedness, epitomized by the equation “man/culture = women/nature” (Salleh, 1997) three claims seem central – the empirical, the conceptual and the epistemological.

The epistemological link happens to be the most contested and most refuted is that women possess more knowledge about earth systems than men due to increased contact as the primary resource collector and household managers (Eaton and Lorentzen, 2003). Like most of feminist thought, ecofeminism too has contradictory streams of thought, classified as those who affirm and those who deny the nature-women connection, alternatively viewing it as a source of strength and weakness (Tong, 2009, P.243). Having outlined the basic postulates of ecofeminism, due emphasis must also be laid on “essentialist” ecofeminism, a skewed and partial form of this school of thought that has emerged in establishing a women stakeholders in developmental discourse.

As Noel Sturgeon observes that, ecofeminism has been used as “political intervention that continually shifts its discourse in relation to its negotiation with dominant forces with developmental politics”(Noel Sturgeon, 1997). It is this interpretation of ecofeminist thought that has led to initiatives such as the WID, GAD and WED and has also found expression in the Declaration.

Marx’s Irredeemable Anthropocentrism and the Materialistic World View

“Capitalist production, therefore, only develops the technique and degree of combination of the social process of production by simultaneously undermining the original sources of all wealth – the soil and the worker”

-Karl Marx (1865)

Given Evo Morales’ strong indignation against the capitalist system, one would naturally infer that the declaration would fit squarely within the Marxist framework. But this is not so, the main case for the incompatibility of ethnocentrism with Marx has been made by Eckersley (1992 P. 75 - 94) who states that the efforts to develop a Marxist solution to the environmental crisis may be divided into two streams of “humanist” and “orthodox” Marxists – which loosely also marks the distinction between young and old, matured Marx^{vi}. Orthodox Eco-Marxists conform to what *they* believe to be the basic Marx postulate, that preservation of nature can only be done if it is of some instrumental value.^{vii} Unlike orthodox eco- Marxists, humanist eco- Marxists think it necessary to reassess *their* understanding of Marx’s view of ecology as technologically optimistic and highly materialistic. Gorz also laid down the common accusation that Marx believed that all ecological problems would be solved in the “abundance” of the communist period (Gorz, 1982). Eckersley in criticism of humanists, duly points out that the Marxist perspective is “irredeemably anthropocentric” and that in neglecting the “Promethean orientation” of the Marxist dialectic runs the risk of being called “non- Marxist”^{viii}.

The above claims are largely based on a misunderstanding of Marx’s view of ecology. Foster in his much applauded work, *Marx’s Ecology* (2000), makes a fitting case of sustainable development being explicitly theorized in his *Capital*(1859) and *Manifesto*(1848). *Firstly*, much of the claims of anthropocentrism were based on the use of phrases such as “idiocy of rural life”, “subjugation of nature to man”^{ix} and “subjection of nature’s forces to man”^x. The Communist Manifesto documents the many contradictions of the capitalist system^{xi}and to focus on the phrases alone, would then be a classic case of missing the forest for the trees. *Secondly*, Marx’s words must be understood in a context and time when it was being written: the mid 19th Century. It was a time when even Liebig’s book on Soil Chemistry left scope for divine providence in the form of “imponderables”.

Science wasn’t suffixed with technology and control over nature entailed a holistic understanding in order to avoid plagues and epidemics. To suggest that man was to take unrelenting control over nature in communist state would be illogical. *Thirdly*, by the time Marx wrote *Capital* he was convinced of the unsustainable nature of capitalist agriculture due to two historical developments – (i) the widening crisis in both European and North American agriculture associated with the depletion of natural fertility of soil and (ii) a shift in Liebig’s own work in the late 1850s and 1860s towards a strong ecological critique of capitalism^{xii}.

Marx, deeply influenced by Liebig, coined the terminology of “metabolism” to show the inherent interdependence between Man and Nature how there was an “irreparable rift” caused by the capitalist system^{xiii}. Hence he opined that “social metabolism prescribed by the natural laws itself” required that due to the “robbing” of the soil of its constituent elements, there needed to be a “systematic restoration”.

Marx used it to refer to the actual metabolic interaction between nature and society through human labour, and in a wider sense to describe the complex, dynamic, interdependent set of needs and relations brought into being and constantly reproduced an alienated form under capitalism .^{xiv}

This notion of metabolism gave solid backing to the notion of “alienation” which is often emphasized by Humanist eco-marxists. Hence, Marx arrived at a notion of sustainability which was incompatible with the Capitalist system, his emphasis was on the need to maintain the earth for the sake of “the chain of human generations” captured the very essence of the modern day notion of sustainable development^{xv}.

Analysis of the Declaration: Androcentricism, Anthropocentrism and Alienation

In this section the authors will analyze the extent to which the Declaration abides by and deviates from the basic ideals of Ecofeminism and Marx’s view of ecology.

Reaffirmation of the Nature Women Connection

As mentioned earlier, the nature- woman connection has been one of the most hotly contested notions within the ecofeminist discourse. While today, it has become undeniable that women are the worst sufferers when environments become less hospitable^{xvi} what is still in contention is whether women are intrinsically closer to nature or is such a purported interrelation something that is a social construct. Ortner in her famous essay “*Is Female to Male as Nature is to Culture?*”(1974) reviews exactly this contentious issue. The proposition that women are seen closer to nature was first argued by Simone De Beauvoir who saw women as “*en-soi*”, or beings within themselves as opposed to men who were “*pour-soi*” who were beings-for-themselves (Simone De Beauvoir, 1952). She viewed women’s body as her enemy, using the discomfort caused by menstruation, the pain caused by pregnancy and the total loss of energy resulting from “enslavement” to the species. Woman’s social role, as being confined to the domestic sphere and associated with animal like infants coupled with the clear demarcation between the domestic and the public ensure that she is always seen closer to nature. Hence Ortner concludes that women are not “in reality” closer to nature but that this is merely a construct of culture, she then seeks to work against such a cultural construct, both from institutional as well as cultural angles.

The Declaration affirms the nature-women connection quite clearly. For one, it uses “Mother Earth” and seeks to counter “a civilizing model that is patriarchal”. The potential outcomes of this are disastrous for women, for as both Ortner and Beauvoir propose, true equality cannot be achieved unless such a notion, whether natural or cultural in its origin is destroyed. Hence what is evident is that the Declaration seeks to strengthen this connection and leans towards radical- cultural feminists such as Mary Daly and Susan Griffin and largely resonates with Spiritual Ecofeminists of Starhawk and Carol Christ. The risks of a policy initiative linking itself with a spiritual intellectual foundation are huge and will be discussed later in the paper.

Opposition to Dualistic and Hierarchical Thought

Ecofeminism differs from mainstream Green political thought in one critical way, is that it does not see changing out Anthropocentric view of the world as an end in itself, but seeks to further “exercise a more crucial pathology of our contemporary culture: our power-based structures and relationships” (Gaard, 1993). This oppressive patriarchal conceptual framework consists of value, hierarchical thinking, placing more value on what is “up” rather than “down”.

It includes value dualisms, where pairs are seen as opposites rather than as complementary and that it subscribes to the logic of domination which seeks to justify subordination (Warren, 1999). In fact it is in this intellectual backdrop that Vandana Shiva commented that “I think separateness is the disease of the past. It’s the dinosaur in the intellectual frame.”^{xvii} The Declaration also talks about a mutual interdependence and connectivity. In fact it time and again emphasizes that a new system be based on “complementarity, solidarity, and equality”^{xviii} and “recognizing Mother Earth as a living being with which we have an indivisible, interdependent, complementary and spiritual relationship”. Therefore the declaration decides against separation and against the dualistic thinking of the patriarchal world view.

Condemnation of Western, Patriarchal and Masculine ‘Development’

Shiva traces the proliferation of “modern, reductionist science” which starts from Bacon (1561-1626) whose nature of method and inquiry is termed by her as “conceptualized in ways of rape and torture”. She then points to his promise of creating a “blessed race of heroes” which would dominate society and his claim to manipulate trees, flowers and fruits culturally sanctioned imperial activity by removing organic and animistic assumptions about the cosmos- which constituted the death of nature.

Such a critique though hyperbolic in nature may come across as a complete misconception of science but in its essence it comprises of the truth. The same proposition has been put forth with requests to man’s need to manufacture by Mary Daly, a lesbian separatist feminist who rejected male culture as evil (Mary Daly, 1984). According to her while women had reproductive capacity, mens “technological offsprings” did nothing but pollute the atmosphere. The Declaration also emphatically rejects the “western scientific model” as a model of environmental control which is an “imperialist system for colonization of the planet” where “Mother Earth is converted into a source of raw materials”. Its emphasis on “ a profound shift in agricultural practices toward the sustainable model of production used by indigenous and rural farming peoples, as well as other ancestral models” resonates with Vandana Shiva’s celebration of the Chipko Movement and the higher premium placed on traditional and sustainable living by communities by most ecofeminists.

Affirmation of Sustainable Development and Need Based Production

The declaration is clear in its scope, that “the immense challenge humanity faces of stopping global warming and cooling the planet can only be achieved through a profound shift in agricultural practices toward the sustainable model of production.” As discussed earlier, the concept of sustainable development as defined by the Brundtland Commission is conceptually consistent with Marx’s notion of “metabolism”. Both Marx and Hegel are clear in their critique of affluence and that the production must be according to needs to let people enjoy the developmental value attached to labour simultaneously avoiding the alienation of capitalist society (Stillman, 1983). Similarly, the Declaration talks emphasizes that “all countries need to produce the goods and services necessary to satisfy the fundamental needs of their populations...” Hence while the radical ecocentrism might not fit into the Marxist framework, such a view is not utterly incompatible. While Marx talks about a metabolism and shared exchange between labour and nature, the declaration’s conceptual framework is along the same lines albeit a profound emphasis due to the radical different environmental conditions of our time.

Rights of Mother Earth: Prospects and Challenges

Lack of International Consensus

A simple majority in the United Nations General Assembly needed to pass the resolution to adopt the Universal Declaration would pose as a major obstacle. This being for the axiomatic reason that the notion of granting legal rights to quiescent objects has not diffused into the minds of the general public. Amassing international solidarity would prove to be a predicament. The tenebrous nature of the Declaration would also make it prone to a lot of criticism and garnering broad political support would be difficult. The terms and concepts are arguably quite ambiguous. There is no line drawn between legitimately killing something or violating it’s right as a part of the ecosystem.

Anti- Capitalist Rhetoric

The indelicate words of leaders like Morales about having to eradicate capitalism for the nature to survive^{xix} would not go down well with officials of other governments whose economies have for centuries relied on such a system. Supporting such a movement would equate to obliterating their economies.

Read along with its Preamble, the consistent caveat given by the Declaration is that supporting the movement would mean recognizing capitalism as the sole cause of destruction of nature and that it should be utterly rejected. These impetuous actions have greatly impaired the prospects of the Declaration being adopted.

Threat to Domestic Economies

Bolivia, being a country which structurally greatly depends on the extractive industries will face great difficulty in implementing such a Declaration.

The book *Open Veins* by historian Eduardo Galeano (1971) elucidates the stoic story of how the country was exploited for profiteering by various European nations after the discovery of silver mines. Ruthless abuse of citizens has been clearly documented. In 2010, 70% of Bolivia's exports were in the form of oil, gas and minerals. Such a radical 'green' restructuring shall mean tumultuous transition from the manner the country manages its economy. It remains to be seen how the nation shall break out of this economical structure. Bolivia is not alone in following an economical model which thrives on exploitation of natural resources by multinational corporations, in fact it is this very hegemony that marks the core of the Dependency theory which is the expression of Marxist thought in international relations. By adopting a Declaration, that is so clear in its demand to abolish capitalism, developing nations run a two – prong risk of economic isolation and worsening relations with international players. In a time when hegemony at the UN can overwhelm international consensus against Israel, such a fear of isolation might in itself, prove to be the single biggest disincentive to adopt the Declaration in its fervor. Reasons abound for the Declaration not to get ratified by the UN General Assembly and this may prove to be its cul-de-sac. But this does not mean that rights inherent in nature should be forcefully taken away from it.

A major question that remains is whether there should be a universal adoption of these rights. What remains to be seen is whether the leaders will wait and watch for the Declaration's effect on Latin American countries or whether it will be successful in coercing the developed countries into an agreement that may be one of the most momentous revolutions the modern age has seen.

Endnotes

ⁱ Buxton, Nick (2010) *The Law of Mother Earth: behind Bolivia's Historic Bill*, Global Alliance for the Rights of Nature (<http://therightsofnature.org/bolivia-law-of-mother-earth/> : Last accessed on 15 December 2011)

ⁱⁱ People's Agreement of Cochabamba, World People's Conference on Climate Change and the Rights of Mother Earth, April 24, 2010 (<http://pwccc.wordpress.com/2010/04/24/peoples-agreement/>: Last accessed on 15 December 2011)

ⁱⁱⁱ UN Resolution, Mother Earth : Harmony with Nature (<http://motherearthrights.org/draft-resolution/> : Last accessed on 15 December 2011)

^{iv} Id note 2

^v Goodman, Amy, *Earth day Special :Vandana Shiva and Maude Barlow on Rights of Mother Earth*, Apeil 22,2011 (http://www.democracynow.org/2011/4/22/earth_day_special_vandana_shiva_and : Last accessed on 15 December 2011)

^{vi} Erckersley, *Environmentalism and Political Theory: Toward an Ecocentric Approach*, P. 82

^{vii} Tolman, "Karl Marx, Alienation and the Mastery of Nature",.63 - 74

^{viii} Id Note 6 at P. 88

^{ix} Manifesto, Part I,p. 7-9

^x Id note at P. 10

^{xi} Foster, *Marx's Ecology: Materialism and Nature*, P. 140

^{xii} Id at P. 151

^{xiii} Id at P. 155

^{xiv} Id at P. 158

^{xv} Id. at P. 164

^{xvi} Philipose, “*Women Act: Women and Environmental Protection in India*,” P. 67

^{xvii} Id Note 5

^{xviii} Id Note 2.

¹⁹ World People’s Conference on Climate Change and the Rights of Mother Earth, April 28, 2010. “Peoples’ Agreement”.. Last accessed December 15 2011, at: <http://pwccc.wordpress.com/support>

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