The nature-society dichotomy: the relationship between nature and women

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Abstract

This contribution aims to analyze the woman-nature binomial with reference to the historicization of their relationship and the correspondence of predicative attribution that has seen them subjected, with the aim of highlighting the implications that this correspondence has with respect to the macro-categories of human and nature used within ecological discourse. This work is carried out using a Marxist ecofeminist perspective, as a field of investigation that has made a major contribution to contextualizing the emergence of the concepts used in environmental discourse, showing how the reinterpretation of nature that took place during the rise of capitalism coincided with a redefinition of women through precise logical steps that saw these two subjects go from being considered "savage" to be dominated to "passive" once dominated. The examination of the attributes assigned to women and nature allows us to demonstrate the repercussions that historicization work has on theoretical redefinition, showing how their predicative commonality leads to questioning the very concept of nature in its formal distinction from that of human, thus nullifying the ontological dichotomy present in environmental discourse. Finally, we mention the implications of this deconstruction for the interpretation of the contemporary ecological crisis.

Nature, Human, Women, Savage, Passive

Introduction

This contribution focuses on the relationship between the idea of woman and the idea of nature, and on the way in which the attributes assigend to these two subjects have followed a common development functional to the stabilisation and consolidation of the capitalist system, and whose implications are reflected in the approaches to the environmental question. The aim of this contribution will be to reconstruct the theoretical steps involved in the designation of the predicates attributed to the subjects of this binomial, in order to delve deeper into the implications it has for the way in which ecological discourse is formulated. In particular, the attempt will be to show how the conceptual relationship between these two subjects can bring out the contradiction of an ecological discourse that investigates the environmental crisis through the macro categories of human and nature.

The perspective adopted will be that of Marxist feminists and ecofeminists (Merchant, 1980; Federici, 2004; Guillauimin, 2020; Barca, 2024b), who have linked the development of the capitalist system, the environmental crisis and the sexual division of labour, working in opposition to the essentialist view that interprets women as naturally closer to nature, denouncing this view as the product of the assimilation of "pseudo-ontological" models created by capital[1]. This research, focusing on the woman-nature binomial, has shown the importance of examining the predicates

[1] For further information on the different currents of ecofeminism, cf. Bianchi B. (2012), "Ecofemminismo: il pensiero, i dibattiti, le prospettive", *Deportate, esuli, profughe, 20*, pagg. I-XXVII.

attributed to the classes of subjects involved in the ecological relationship, thus allowing for an analysis of their consequent placement in the two reference categories, namely human and nature, conceived within a dichotomous perspective. Following this work, in fact, the same categories can be investigated in their internal structure, revealing contradictions that undermine the concepts associated with them.

1. Human/nature dichotomy, historical-political context and predicative analysis

In order to see how the work of ecofeminist authors operates within the theoretical understanding of the ecological question, it is necessary to begin this contribution with a brief mention of what is meant by the human/nature dichotomy, as it is the underlying structure of philosophical theories based on these two denotative categories. The dichotomous approach refers to a type of discourse, ecological and not only, which understands reality as characterised by two different ontological domains, whose relationship is not immanent but is realised through theoretical effor[2]. The human/nature "dichotomy" differs from the mere distinction of the two terms in that it implies a hierarchy of values within them that has a prescriptive and normative character. In fact, it establishes a qualitative distance between humanity and non-human nature, attributing a space of independence and autonomy to the first term with respect to the second, specifically the one of "society", an ontological category parallel to that of human. This theoretical framework, which still operates in contemporary narratives, is based on the assumption of a primacy of reason over other characteristics, which would confer superiority to the human category as the only rational one. Furthermore, by working only on an ontological level, it does not take into account the historical origins from which the concepts of nature and human have been formed, effectively hiding the political level which, on the contrary, allows us to question the actors present in both categories.

This gap is filled by the work carried out in the field of ecofeminism, which, by examining the role of women within society, has shown how the predicates historically assigned to the latter correspond to those historically assigned to nature, and they have done so by involving the birth of the capitalist system, recognizing in it the roots of this correspondence[3]. This political system operated, in fact, on two levels, material and symbolic, whose combination allowed for the establishment of the initial dynamics of appropriation necessary for the functioning of the system itself. Specifically, the temporal context of reference that allows for predictive analysis refers to that used in the work of authors such as Silvia Federici (Federici, 2004) and Jason W. Moore (Moore, 2015), who trace the paradigm shift in the interpretation of nature, the former, and of women, the latter, from the crisis of feudalism and, therefore, from the century of the first enclosures and the colonisation of America by Columbus, since the first dynamics of appropriation and exploitation typical of nascent capitalism are located in this period. These two authors are followed by Carolyn Merchant (Merchant, 1980), who places the culmination of this correspondence to the emergence of the mechanism, in direct agreement with the new economic and commercial orientation. This transition marked, in fact, the passage from an idea of the world as an organism that involved the representation of what we today call society as well as what we now call nature, to an interpretation of reality based on rigid binaries, functional for its organization with a view to economic profit.

In this phase, the association of the figures of women and nature played a decisive role in creating a cultural background that could support the plan to degrade and use these subjects. There are those, like Carolyn Merchant[4], who argue that the devaluation of women, along with the redefinition of labour roles, preceded the devaluation of nature, which was associated with women in order to

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[2] Cf. Moore J. (2015), *Capitalism in the Web of Life. Ecology and Accumulation of Capital*, London: Verso.

[3] A discussion of predicative designation in relation to nature and women would be incomplete without taking postcolonial studies into account, since the predicates assigned to women, nature and colonised peoples are intertwined. Due to lack of space, it is not possible to analyse them in detail here.

[4] Cf. Merchant C. (1980), *The Death of Nature: Women, Ecology and the Scientific Revolution*, New York: Harper & Row.

legitimize its violation, while other authors, such as Colette Guillauimin[5], argue on the contrary that it has been possible for society to appropriate women's bodies and work relegating them to the natural dimension. Regardless of this controversy, what is important is the fact that in this period we are witnessing a feminization of nature and a naturalization of women, where the use of one authorized the use of the other. In fact, their subjugation appeared necessary for the functioning of a system based on exploitation, since both were configured as «forces of reproduction»[6] that had to be made efficient and profitable.

This subjugation went through a process of domestication that, from a theoretical point of view, took the form of conceptual devaluation, which found its first legitimization in the change in the meaning of the concept of "savage" that is the first predicate assigned to them during the installation of capitalism.

As Moore writes «As recently as fourteenth century, *savage* meant "intrepid", "indomitable"»[7] and therefore had a positive connotation. As political and economic conditions changed, this became a derogatory term used primarily to indicate in a negative way[8] what was opposed to a new idea of society that, as we saw earlier, was being built around the idea of reason as a human faculty capable of detaching itself from sensible conditioning and aimed at controlling them. In this sense the idea of "savage" was configured precisely as an irrational and uncontrolled activity, whose unpredictability had to be contained. Strictly speaking, this term was actually used to describe the character of all those entities that were interpreted as dangerous obstacles to the natural and social planning process. In this context, therefore, a concept of nature emerges in which it is portrayed as essentially unrestrained and uncontrollable in its ability to bring «violence, storms, droughts and general chaos»[9]. This idea were created in direct opposition to the human category of society, which is presented as the main, if not the only, interested victim of such violence. This imagery, functional to legitimizing the «man's right over nature»[10] led to the assertion that, as Merchant reports «the earth without [human] toil and sweat produces nothing that is not deadly or venomous»[11].

As the author also claims, «Simbolically associated with unruly nature was the dark side of women»[12], who were represented by the figure, both abstract and real, of the witch, a term that encompassed all women who opposed the emerging order. Their resistance was, in fact, suppressed, as is well known, by witch hunts, whose function was not so much to punish individual acts as to eliminate general forms of female behaviour that were «made abominable in the eyes of the population»[13] by reference to the idea of savagery mentioned above.

This widespread process of functional indoctrination during the period of transition from feudalism changed direction during the period of consolidation of the capitalist system, when the ruling class began to enjoy a growing sense of security. So, when the reference to the idea of savage to be dominated for the good of society exhausted its function of control, a different way of understanding women and nature was developed, one more adapted to conceiving of them as available resources to be appropriated for free. In fact, as Federici writes:

> Once women were defeated with the witch hunt, the image of feminility constructed in the transition was discarded as an unneccessary tool, and a new, tamed one took its place. While before women

[5] Cf. Guillaumin C. (2020), *Sexe, race et pratique du pouvoir. L'idée de nature*; trad. it. a cura di Sara Garbagnoli, Vincenza Perilli, Valeria Ribeiro Corosaacz, *Sesso, razza e pratica del potere. L'idea di natura*, Verona: Ombre Corte.
[6] See Barca S. (2024), *Forze di riproduzione. Per una ecologia politica femminista*, Milano: Edizioni Ambiente, p. 18.
[7] Moore J., Patel R. (2018), *A History of the World in Seven Cheap Things*, Oakland: University of California Press, p. 45.
[8] The term "negative" refers to "what-is-not".
[9] o*p. cit.* Merchant C., *The Death of Nature*, p. 2.
[10] Ibid, p. 185.
[11] Ibid, p. 185.
[12] Ibid, p. 132.
[13] Federici S. (2004), *Caliban and the Witich, The Body and Primitive Accumulation*, New York: Autonomedia, p. 170.

had been portrayed as savage, rebellious, insubordinate beings […] they were now depicted as passive.[14]

The emergence of the idea of passivity as a characteristic of these subjects is even more evident if we compare this passage with the birth of the mechanistic paradigm, in which nature began to be conceived as inanimate matter to be studied and analized. The attribute of passivity implied, in fact, that it could be broken down, dissected and manipulated at will, since it lacked internal forces and was governed by predictable and controllable physical laws.

The establishment of this concept served to modify a cultural paradigm that now needed to legitimize the exploitation of human and natural resources, creating an image of nature as a female to be dissected through experiment and of women as pure weak bodies. The association between woman as a body and nature as a matter is significant in capitalism's desire to maximize the social utility of these two subjects. In fact, since matter and the body were conceived as passively constituted, they could be dominated and subjected to economic necessity, on the one hand through the idea of rationalization of natural goods from above, and on the other through the reference to a rationality capable of controlling needs, which could thus be regulated and ultimately suppressed.

The historical reconstruction carried out thus far has theoretical implications that enable us to investigate the dichotomous human/nature form with which this work began, which also constitute the basis for its overcoming.

2. Theoretical implications of predicative reconstruction and overcoming the dichotomy

As we have seen, predicative attribution has seen women and nature move from being considered as “savage” to be dominated to “passive” once dominated, in relation to the different periods of capitalism. This brief historical overview not only reconstructs the social and economic motivations underlying these designations, but also highlights the theoretical perspective regarding the internal structure of the dichotomy, starting with a focus on the subjects involved in the two macro categories of human and nature.

The overview of predicative designation highlight, in fact, two cardinal aspects of the dichotomous structure based on the primacy of reason, the analysis of which allows us to develop an interpretation aimed at its surpassing.

The first of these two aspects concerns the instrumental nature of the ontologization process, which aims to interpret these attributes as if they were limited to describing the essence of the subjects they refer to, in order to make their exploitation “universally” lawful from a theoretical and practical point of view. In fact, as we have seen, the physiognomy of this essence changes according to political and social needs. The significant side of this operation constitutes the second aspect, which is more closely linked to the theoretical contribution that this reconstruction allows us to illuminate. Indeed, it shows that both predicates, before designating something in themselves, were formed as relational terms relating to «that which is an impediment to the domination of Reason»[15], or rather as limit concepts that represent, precisely, the other-than-reason.

In light of these two moments, the human/nature dichotomy can be analyzed in a different way than is done within the strictly ontological perspective, which is internal both to philosophical debate and to the symbolic organization of capitalism. In fact, if it is based on the idea of the human being as characterized by rationality, which gives him a certain distance from the natural sphere, it is clear that the juxtaposition of woman-nature breaks down this structure, and instead leads to the delineation of a different dichotomous picture. Indeed, the assimilation of the two subjects, which occurred through predicative commonality, shows the process of dehumanization to which women were subjected, breaking the theoretical barriers that this particular dichotomy implied. The dualism that

[14] Ibid, p. 103.
[15] Ibid, p. 152.

emerges, having reason itself as its reference point, sees women and nature on one side and man and society on the other, thus revealing how the concept of human used in this dichotomy is in reality constructed solely on the characteristics of the latter, therefore of man and society. At the same time, on the other side of the dualism, the partial humanization of nature, in its association with woman, and the related fact that this category includes both non-human and human subjects, leads to a rethinking of the very idea of nature which, rather than indicating specific beings, is now interpreted as a term historically created to include all the subjects that capitalism wanted to appropriate. In this sense, the broad scope of the concept of nature, in its encompassing both non-human and human subjects, and the partiality of the concept of human in its including of only some of them, leads to a crisis of both, which cease to be understood as designating something ontologically defined, revealing, on the contrary, their historical significance and their normative and prescriptive function. In this way, the analysis of the predicates of "savage" and "passive", conducted starting from the question of the relationship between women and nature, reveals the power dynamics hidden within the theoretical and cultural paradigm that constitutes the reference point for ecological discourse based on this dichotomy.

The ontological deconstruction carried out here can, therefore, also prove significant in questioning the contemporary interpretation of the ecological crisis which, based on the operation of the paradigm criticized here, follows the same rhythm, described above, relating to the predicates. In fact, we look at climatic catastrophes through the idea of nature reacting wildly, and we think of the solution by looking at geo-engineering, which implies a return to the idea of nature as something that can be manipulated and, therefore, passive. Instead, the work carried out on the basis of ecofeminist analyses leads to an epistemological rupture whose consequences on the theoretical level are reflected on the practical level. This rupture leads, indeed, to the rejection of solutions that include a rigid delimitation of the areas of intervention. In fact, the elimination of the dichotomous system uncovers a relationality between entities that nullifies the possibility of thinking about the ecological crisis in the terms just described, where the relationship always implies a vertical and separate action of one actor on another, defining instead a space of equality and reciprocity. In this sense, the critique of the concepts of human and nature invalidates the the consequent valuel hierarchy underlies what has been mentioned above, redefining a space in which to consider all the subjects mentioned on the same level, both in terms of the importance attributed to them and in terms of the behaviors to be adopted, thus laying the foundations for the liberation of all historically exploited subjects.

Conclusion

In conclusion, therefore, Marxist ecofeminist studies focusing on the analysis of the relationship between women and nature have enabled in-depth investigation of the human/nature dichotomy present in contemporary ecological debate. The reconstruction of the emergence of the predicates "savage" and "passive" attributed to women and nature has in fact laid the foundations for a reinterpretation of the subjects included in the two reference categories, revealing a different dichotomous structure that has led to the emergence of an interpenetration of the two, which has brought about the annulment of their distinction on an ontological level, showing, on the contrary, their purely historical character with a prescriptive role. In this way, the work carried out on theoretical crying has practical implications for the interpretation of the environmental crisis, opening up a space for investigation that foreshadows non-top-down solutions to the crisis itself.

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