

# Foreword to the English version

The COVID-19 pandemic has taught us a series of lessons. The first, obvious lesson is that each country separately is incapable of coping with such a massive emergency. When it comes to tackling international crises, the European Union has an important role to play. An adequate political response was and is only possible through cooperation at an international level.

More fundamentally however, the reality is that nature destruction – including massive deforestation in the “Global South” for the sake of our extractive economy – contributes directly to the spread of disease-causing zoonoses like COVID-19. The pandemic thus not only proved the importance of a high-performance healthcare infrastructure, but has also highlighted how crucial it is to take care of *more-than-human worlds*. This translates, among other things, into the need for an ambitious European biodiversity policy, embedded in the global biodiversity strategy.

Ultimately, the crux of our interconnected crises lies in the need for a different economic policy *tout court*.

As long as we continue to rely on the extraction of raw materials for production; as long as the European economy does not become a regenerative one, restoring and maintaining the biosphere, we will continue to run around in circles. This is made clear for instance in the illuminating report *Why the European Green Deal needs ecofeminism* (2021), that rightly observes: “the reliance on the healing powers of the so-called free market, that is set to be more efficient in managing public goods, fails to regard the interconnectedness of the economy, our society, and the environment”<sup>1</sup>

“While there is increasing consensus that we need to decarbonize our economies (exemplified by agreements of green deal packages such as the European Green Deal), transforming towards this conception of a “green economy” will not be enough to drastically reduce emissions, nor to enhance gender and social justice as it strongly relies on technological innovation, green investments and green consumerism, thus failing to include intersectional social justice”<sup>2</sup>

Recognizing this need for a more fundamental change, and based on conceptions of interconnection, equity and intersectionality, we introduce in this essay an economy of care. An economy that links environmentalism and sustainability to social justice, by emphasizing how the environment intersects with other social issues such as inequality, sexism and racism.<sup>3</sup>

# Introduction

As we write this introduction, New York has suffered unprecedented flooding. Cars float around, the subway is knee-deep in water. In the space of one hour, more rain has fallen than ever recorded. South Sudan, Kenya, Niger and Chad have also been hit by serious floods in the past year. It chimes with what the Indian author Amitav Ghosh notes in his book *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable* (2016). As coastal cities, Mumbai and New York are extremely susceptible to flooding and other natural disasters. This is no coincidence, but a direct consequence of the way they were conceived: from 'a colonial vision on the world, in which proximity to the water represents power and security, mastery and conquest.' That was not always so: many old port cities in Asia, as well as in Europe, are further inland and hence better protected. It is as if the need to consider 'the unpredictable furies of the ocean' was widely acknowledged in former times, Ghosh writes. But with the rise of the British Empire those insights were jettisoned and port cities built right by the sea. As a result, metropolises such as Jakarta are now at risk from the rise in sea level and will need to be relocated. Thinking that we can ignore nature as actor is a form of fatal hubris. That much was clear when

a tsunami swept over Fukushima's nuclear power station.

Instead, we propose the power of an ethics of care based on the premise that as human beings we are part of the web of life and rooted in natural and social relationships and interdependencies. It is this myriad of connections that give humans their identity. The African proverb 'it takes a village to raise a child' encapsulates this idea well.

This alternative calls for changes to some of the fundamental assumptions of our society. This will only come about when the economy is once more embedded in the democratic values of an ethics of care. What we talk about, how we view the world and one another, the concrete actions we take: it is all interrelated. That means we need to regroup ourselves and once again shoulder responsibility for the world we live in; view that world with an open mind and a sense for solidarity. This is not an individual, but a collective, political mission.

That brings us to the structure of this essay, which we approach as a thought experiment. In the first chapter, we will set out to introduce ecofeminism as an analytical framework and a source of inspiration that is both powerful and more pertinent than ever. In the second chapter we start our analysis with concrete historical context before we outline a new, hopeful perspective on how we might achieve a caring

society and a genuine economy of care. We argue the case for placing care where it belongs: as one of the leading principles at the heart of a just society, which we should all endeavour to work towards.

This is not an easy task, that much is clear. It calls for a critical examination of some of the essential aspects of the dominant modern-western mode of being. We have, in fact, known for decades that we need to do this. At this juncture in time, when we have billionaires dreaming of travelling to Mars, it is astonishing to read what the Jewish-German philosopher Hannah Arendt tasked us with as early as 1958. In her book about the Human Condition, she notes that, in the first place, we must trace back ‘modern world alienation, its twofold flight from the earth into the universe and from the world into the self, to its origins.’<sup>4</sup> Only by re-establishing equal relationships with everybody on Earth, recognising that we are part of more-than-human worlds and fostering those connections, will we be able to exercise the necessary care to ensure a liveable future, with a view to a good life for all. Because we want to take care of everyone.



## CHAPTER 1

# An ethics of care

It is summer. The European continent is seeing infernal temperatures in some regions and cataclysmic floods in others. Canada, Spain and Italy break temperature records, yet again, while fierce wildfires rage across Algeria and Morocco, claiming scores of casualties. In other parts of the world, huge migrant and refugee caravans cross deserts and seas, hoping to reach more habitable regions, and all too often perishing in the process. Amidst the more immediate impact on people's lives, it's easy to forget the damage to ecosystems and the long-term consequences for the future.

This is not the script of some scary sci-fi film: we are talking summer 2021. The coronavirus continues to hold humanity to ransom. Around the world, 'caring for one another' became a key point of focus when the COVID-19 pandemic first hit. Within the space of a year, nursing in many countries evolved from an understaffed and underappreciated profession to a hugely popular subject to study. Yet at the same time patents, towering vaccine prices and Big Pharma's

hunger for profit are, in a cynical paradox, preventing the vaccination of billions of people. Life has ground to a halt in many areas. People are dying. Global solidarity is a distant proposition.

‘What is this thing that has happened to us? It’s a virus, yes. In and of itself it holds no moral brief. But it is definitely more than a virus. [...] Whatever it is, coronavirus has made the mighty kneel and brought the world to a halt like nothing else could. Our minds are still racing back and forth, longing for a return to “normality”, trying to stitch our future to our past and refusing to acknowledge the rupture. But the rupture exists. And in the midst of this terrible despair, it offers us a chance to rethink the doomsday machine we have built for ourselves. Nothing could be worse than a return to normality. Historically, pandemics have forced humans to break with the past and imagine their world anew. This one is no different. It is a portal, a gateway between one world and the next. We can choose to walk through it, dragging the carcasses of our prejudice and hatred, our avarice, our data banks and dead ideas, our dead rivers and smoky skies behind us. Or we can walk through lightly, with little luggage, ready to imagine another world. And ready to fight for it.’

— ARUNDHATI ROY<sup>5</sup>



The system, as it is, is not working. It is a doomsday machine, marginalising too many people and causing too much damage to the world around us. We need a system change, a transformation of the economy and a reorganisation of society. The 2019 report by the IPBES (Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services) stressed this need for transformative social change, which it defined as ‘a fundamental reorganization of economic and social systems, including changes in paradigms and values.’<sup>6</sup> The findings of the most recent IPCC report confirm this: if we keep on our current course the rise in global temperatures will not be limited to 1.5°C, but increase to 2, 3 or even 4°C. The consequences will be catastrophic for both humans and the environment.

This does not only call for the transformation of existing structures so they work within the limits of our planet, we need a culture shift, too. Every system change starts with a change in mentality, a different world view. The American systems thinker Donella Meadows puts it aptly: ‘The shared idea in the minds of society, the great big unstated assumption – unstated because unnecessary to state; everyone already knows them – constitute that society’s paradigm, or deepest set of beliefs about how the world works.’<sup>7</sup> Today’s socio-ecological crises originate in a number of dominant ideas in contemporary society: the notion that one person is superior to another and that humans are superior to all other life; that nature

is a lifeless heap of raw materials, a mere backdrop to our lives; that economic growth is vital to our well-being so we have to keep producing and consuming.

Ecofeminism provides a framework for creating a break with our fundamental convictions. This essay seeks to acknowledge the inspiring thinkers who help bring about the constructive change that is so vitally important to future generations. Using ecology as a starting point while keeping in mind that everything on our planet is connected, we want to contribute to the political discourse needed to shape the necessary social changes. We are hoping to play a positive part in building a movement that is constantly evolving and that aims to make our world a beautiful, tolerant and good place to live. A place that will remain live-able for those after us, from the smallest fungus to the largest rainforest and all the people on our Earth.

### **1. The footsteps in which we follow**

The French philosopher Emilie Hache dates the emergence of ecofeminism as a school of thought to the political context of the 1980s.<sup>8</sup> The publication of the Club of Rome report *The Limits to Growth* in 1972, the nuclear arms race during the Cold War, mass deforestation around the world and various famines marked the start of the global ecological crisis.<sup>9</sup>

Ecofeminism has its roots in the activism of that era. The French philosopher Françoise d'Eaubonne is widely credited with coining the term in 1974, although some authors argue that it cropped up in different places at the time.<sup>10</sup>

Confronted with the nuclear threat and the destruction of our habitat, various feminist collectives began taking coordinated action. Nuclear power stations were blockaded, roads barricaded and people took to the streets, chaining themselves to fences and trees. It was during those protests that the first texts with an ecofeminist slant were written.<sup>11</sup> These women discovered parallels between the way modern society treated the Earth and the way it treated people who differed from the white male norm. The natural environment was regarded as a reservoir of dead matter, ready for extraction. Women and people of colour were seen as inferior. It is at this juncture between the destruction of nature and social oppression that we find ecofeminism.

One of the major inspirations for ecofeminists worldwide was the Indian Chipko movement. This female-led movement emerged in the 1970s and became an international model for the protection of the environment and the future of the community.<sup>12</sup> In the Garhwal hills, an extensive and delicate ecosystem in the Indian Himalayas where the Ganges has its source, the forests were historically managed as communal resources with strict, albeit informal, social

mechanisms for keeping its exploitation in check and the ecosystem balanced.<sup>13</sup> But in the early 1970s, the region was hit by devastating floods and earthquakes. Mass deforestation higher up and the replacement of the original deciduous trees by more profitable pines for commercial exploitation were found to have been the cause of these disasters.<sup>14</sup> The deciduous forest had played a central role in maintaining soil and water stability even after heavy rain, so its replacement by lucrative pines was ruinous.<sup>15</sup> The devastation was immense, the human suffering and damage to the natural world compounded by the significant economic impact on the local population.

The years that followed saw numerous protests against commercial forest exploitation. The very first Chipko action took place spontaneously in April 1973, with villagers demonstrating against the felling of ash trees in Mandal Forest.<sup>16</sup> In March 1974, twenty-seven women saved yet more trees from the 'contractor's axe'.<sup>17</sup> Their tactic was to spread around the forest and embrace the trees so they could not be cut. The Hindi word '*chipko*' literally means 'to stick', and it is in this form of nonviolent resistance, which goes back more than three hundred years in India, that the term 'tree hugger' has its origins.

By 1975, over three hundred villages in the region faced the ongoing threat of earthquakes caused by commercial exploitation. Increased erosion and the resulting decline in land productivity meant that villages that had been self-sufficient in the past now had

to resort to importing food.<sup>18</sup> The protests widened. Today Chipko is a national movement, which has managed to force a fifteen-year ban on commercial logging in the region and to block clearcutting in the Western Ghats and the Vindhya Range. It also continues to press for a nation-wide forest policy that is more responsive to people's needs and the land's ecological requirements.<sup>19</sup>

Ecofeminism is first and foremost a political framework,<sup>20</sup> a lens through which to look critically at the world, exploring 'the interconnections of dominance between humans and between humans and the earth.'<sup>21</sup> It is a perspective that clearly shows that environmental destruction and social oppression have the same origin. One of the main themes running through this body of thought is the question of care for the community. What are the social, biological and emotional conditions for looking after, repairing and healing damaged communities and environments?<sup>22</sup> An ethics of care focuses on the inextricable link between human and non-human nature and on 'affective engagement' with the world around us.<sup>23</sup> Seeing the compound, interconnected socio-ecological crises, ecofeminists around the globe point to the importance of a caring commitment and dedication that are currently lacking in public discourse.<sup>24</sup> 'The resilience of ecosystems, unpaid and unrecognized forms of work, social reciprocity and care are unvalued or undervalued.'<sup>25</sup> This has been a factor in 'the

dispossession of peoples from their land and livelihood, the destruction of natural habitat and the general degradation of the environment'.<sup>26</sup> Ecofeminism seeks to facilitate the transition from 'unhealthy, life-denying systems and relationships to healthy, life-affirming ones'.<sup>27</sup> We need to evolve towards a new enchantment with the world, and rethink the place of human beings in it. We need a new logic, one that views each person as part of a web of relationships, that ties individual wellbeing to the flourishing of others and considers the importance of healthy relationships and context.<sup>28</sup>

A fully integrative project, ecofeminism seeks to develop an alternative to our present culture.<sup>29</sup> This fits in with what Vandana Shiva and Maria Mies have termed the ecological shift:<sup>30</sup>

'The ecological shift involves not seeing ourselves as outside the ecological web of life, as masters, conquerors and owners of the earth's resources. It means seeing ourselves as members of the earth family, with responsibility to care for other species and life on earth in all its diversity, from the tiniest microbe to the largest mammal. It creates the imperative to live, produce and consume within ecological limits and within our share of ecological space, without encroaching on the rights of other species and other people.'