

Evanoff, Richard (1995). "Rethinking Ecofeminism: An Interview with Janet Biehl." *Japan Environment Monitor* 75:10–11, 20 (part 1); 76:4–5, 19 (part 2).

Rethinking Ecofeminism
An Interview with Janet Biehl

by Richard Evanoff

Janet Biehl's book *Finding Our Way: Rethinking Ecofeminist Politics* (available from AK Distribution) has generated a good deal of controversy for its forthright criticisms of current ecofeminist thought. Biehl is a key spokesperson and theoretician for social ecology. The following interview, intended especially for an audience in Japan, was conducted at her home in Burlington, Vermont on July 31, 1994.

Part 1

Evanoff: Why did you write *Finding Our Way: Rethinking Ecofeminist Politics*?

Biehl: I wrote the book because I was very concerned about the way feminists within the ecology movement were attempting to bring feminism and ecology together. The feminist movement, as it emerged in the United States around 1969 or 1970, was a radical feminist movement that was interested not only in eliminating the domination of women but in eliminating hierarchy as such altogether. I was very influenced by anarchism in this respect, which gave an analysis of culture and ideology that is oppressive to women for the purpose of integrating women into the finest humanist traditions—traditions of liberation that the Left had inherited from the Enlightenment. Anarchism would look at ideas which claimed that women were closer to nature, that women were more emotional than men, that women are more concerned with their bodies than men, that women inhabited their bodies more than men and were therefore basically more physical and less intellectual creatures. It would look at ideologies which said that women had to stay at home and raise children, and not go out and have any autonomy of their own or try to achieve freedom for themselves in their own right.

But the early feminist movement—radical feminism—would look at these ideologies and say, no, this is wrong; we have to change this. There are whole social structures of hierarchy and domination that are keeping women in a certain location in society and these ideologies have to be eliminated because they are helping confine women to this oppressive place in the social structure, to the home especially. So the early feminists addressed many of the same ideologies that ecofeminists were concerned with, but saw them as obstacles that had to be destroyed. In the early '70s and especially the mid-'70s the feminist movement in America became less radical. It came to be taken over more by liberal feminists. NOW [the National Organization for Women] which dated from the early '60s became much more prominent in the feminist movement. The aim more and more came to be integrating women into business and into society as a whole. So the aspirations for equity for women came to be identified with aspirations to be able to become business people just like men—to become CEOs, to be able to take part in all the rotten and corrupt things that go on in society just like men.

At the same time, the radical critique more and more was inclining toward a reevaluation of the ideology that had oppressed women—saying for example, yes, women are more emotional than men; so maybe what we should be doing is not trying to eliminate that ideology but reevaluate the emotions. After all, emotions have been disparaged in this society and intellect hasn't gotten us very far—it's brought us nuclear weapons, after all. Maybe intellect and reason aren't all they're cracked up to be, given what men have done with them. Women are the repositories of the emotional, and that isn't such a bad thing. Women haven't built nuclear weapons with our emotions after all. We've done something very good and life-giving as a matter of fact: we've raised children; we've kept the home nice. Maybe the earlier feminists were wrong in trying to eliminate this ideology. Another example: Maybe the physical isn't so bad after all. This is the era of sexual liberation. Opening up desire, finding sexual freedom for women seemed to be very much in harmony with this reevaluating the body as something quite positive compared to the mind, considering what the "mind" has done. So the newer feminists went through all aspects of this oppressive, sexist ideology and instead of trying to eliminate them, tried to reevaluate them.

Around the time that the ecology movement started up, critiques were beginning to be made, similar to the "cultural feminist" critique that I'm describing, which saw the Church, the Enlightenment, all the larger institutions of Western European and American society, as contributing ultimately to the ongoing ecological disaster. A number of feminists inclined towards this cultural critique aligned themselves with an ecological critique, saying for example, well, if Western culture said that women are closer to nature as a term of disparagement, maybe it's not so bad to be closer to nature; maybe that's what we need now in this world. After all, men have tried to transcend nature and look what that's done: they've ended up dominating nature; they've brought us all of these ecological disasters all over the world. A redemptive element came into it: precisely because of their alleged closeness to nature, women would be the ones to save the world. An injection of the so-called feminine ethos of caring, nurturing, and closeness to nature was needed to alter the consciousness necessary to overcome the ecological crisis.

This is the logic behind it, but these characterizations of women remained exactly the same; the ecofeminists were simply reevaluating them. In fact, these characterizations are nothing to be trifled with because by accepting the "fact" of women as less rational than men, they were boxing themselves into the same sexist stereotype that men had been using to justify the domination of women for millennia. When patriarchal society said that women were closer to nature, it wasn't in the sense that we think of today, where bourgeois women like to go out and walk in the woods and pick flowers, or collect herbs, or do gardening, or try to put a mystical gloss on their lives by seeing themselves as connected with nature and its cycles, such as the cycle of reproduction. All of this has a mystical appeal to people in the present society where so little seems actually meaningful in our lives because we live under a commodified capitalist society.

It wasn't like that for a couple of millennia. The idea of women's closeness to nature was not an attractive mystical gloss that one could put on one's life, as an ecological redeemer. On the contrary, Aristotle said that women were inferior to men. He grudgingly admitted that women were human beings but he saw their minds as inferior. He saw their contribution to reproduction as being solely material. Women just provided the matter for the new baby; males provided the form, the mind and the whole structure

of the baby. Women were identified with the material and were not participants in the polis, in political life. Many of them were confined to the home (although that was not so much the case among lower class women in Athens). But the cultural idea was that women would stay at home and be concerned entirely with childbearing—they were not educated.

This was abysmal. This was not a mystical gloss on one's life. We're talking about serious oppression here. The Catholic Church during the Middle Ages perpetuated Aristotle's idea that women were material and contributed only the matter to regeneration. To its credit, as many feminists in America forget today, the Church did say that women and men had equal souls and those souls equally had to be redeemed. There was a good universalizing, egalitarian backbone in Christian ideology in this sense. But Christian priests and theologians kept trying to get around this, and did everything they could to justify a more debased view of women, irrespective of the equality of their souls. Those periods in the Middle Ages in which women were regarded as being closest to nature, the most emotional, the most rank, were often the times of the deepest superstitions and when women were most confined to lives in their households. This is serious oppression; this is not a mystique; this is not a nature mysticism; this isn't an attractive paganism. This is an ideology of oppression. It wasn't until the nineteenth century that scientists began to get it straight: the contribution of the sexes to reproduction is exactly the same.

I feel it is very dangerous that a mystique is being placed on women and their alleged intuition, emotionalism, physicalism, attunement to cycles and so on. So I wrote the book to try to remind ecofeminists who were creating this mystique that they were playing with fire and that this was a regressive step in the development of feminism and the progress of human beings generally, not a progressive one as they were trying to make it out to be. In the book I talked about a couple of different approaches ecofeminists were taking and tried to show that they were not as liberating as imagined. I talked about a psychobiologicistic ecofeminism that clung to these ideologies and seemed to genuinely support them and to believe that women were actually the caring and ecological redeemers of society, the ecological mentors of men.

There are other ecofeminists I discuss in the book who understand that these ideas are regressive, but for reasons of their own which we can only speculate about, were advancing the idea of using these ideologies even though they knew the ideologies were dangerous. I call these the social constructionist ecofeminists. They understand that these ideologies are really just inversions, as I've described, of a patriarchal stereotype. But in contrast to the psychobiologicistic feminists who take this idea seriously, the social constructionists, maintaining the legacy of the earlier radical feminism, see women and men as intrinsically equal, or certainly potentially so. They see women as having all the intellectual abilities, not as being closer to nature really, not as being more emotional than men really, not as being lodged in body more than men really. They reject all that stuff just as much as I do. They understand that this is an ideology that is socially constructed and applied to women. But yet they become ecofeminists and seem to be attracted to the idea that women could be the spokespersons for nature against ecological destruction. This produces a very odd conjunction: it's like Hitler adopting the Star of David instead of the swastika to exterminate the Jews, or Blacks in the civil rights movement adopting the Confederate flag to fight for their civil rights. Social constructionists, who know

better, say we can consciously choose to make use of these ideas to fight for the betterment of women and nature. Ynestra King calls it the “women = nature” social construction.

Evanoff: So the idea that “women = nature” is not a metaphysical assertion, but a socially constructed one?

Biehl: Yes, but Ynestra King says that even though we know it’s wrong, we can consciously use it to create a movement to liberate women and nature. There are very few movements in history I can think of that organized themselves around regressive imagery, that they knew was regressive, in the name of overcoming that regressive idea! It makes absolutely no sense at all; it’s entirely nonsensical. But since I wrote the book I found that this is more and more the tendency that ecofeminism is taking, bizarre as it is, illogical as it. Social constructionist ecofeminism, however, has now entered the American academy, and Japanese readers should know that the university system is the repository, indeed the mortuary, of radical movements in the United States. Marxism is very big in America, not as a political movement—not as a political movement, but in the academy. You would never know this from the general culture at large, but it’s really booming in the universities. All different kinds of feminism, including ecofeminism, have entered the academy, where they are being taken apart, papers are being written, and analyses are being made.

Finally, since I wrote the book yet another kind of ecofeminism has developed. This is the kind of ecofeminism that understands the illogicality of the social constructionist point of view, that certainly doesn’t agree with the psychobiologicistic point of view, but wants to regard ecofeminism as a new humanism, as something that can replace humanism. How can that be? Well, this ecofeminism argues—and I’m thinking especially of Val Plumwood who has gained a lot of prominence lately in the academy—that it’s not that women are the repositories of the body and intuition, closer to nature and the cycles, and so on, while men are intellectual, active, out in the world, aggressive, and so on. They want to argue that men have to develop their feminine side, that men have to develop their feelings, their emotions, and so on, as well as retaining their rationality, whereas women have to develop their intellects and so on, so that we all become fully rounded human beings embodying both the stereotypically masculine and the stereotypically feminine.

This sounds very good, but in a reply to Val Plumwood’s review of my book I wrote that this just sounds like updated humanism to me. Why do we call this feminism? The answer, of course, that ecofeminists would give is that humanism is intrinsically masculine because the standard of “human” has always been male. But again, if one accepts that definition—that what is human is that which is male or masculine whereas the feminine is something outside that—then I’m accepting being written out of humanity. And I’m not going to accept being written out of humanity. I don’t think most women in the world would accept being written out of humanity (except for a few ecofeminists in the academy). I think that humanism is an elastic concept that can develop. In earlier centuries humanism went hand-in-hand with a good deal of racism, for example. That has now, hopefully, been overcome, certainly officially in the generally accepted humanist ideologies today. Why can’t it grow to encompass and include women as well? If Val Plumwood is going to advance a set of ideas that sound like humanism to me, there’s seems to be no good reason to call them feminism. If you call them feminism,

then are you excluding men in reprisal? Is that what's going on here? It doesn't make sense. I think that I would want to see the kind of ideas that Plumwood calls for as an updated kind of humanism.

I don't know the extent to which Japanese readers are aware of the fact that identity politics is very strong in the United States. Identity politics is the idea that you first identify with your gender, tribe, ethnicity, or religion—you are that first and a human being second. Of course, ecofeminism, both in and out of the academy, is very affected by this kind of identity politics, not only identifying women with their gender but with nature. So calls for a humanism these days are not very popular, and I think that's one reason ecofeminists are unwilling to accept a call for an ecological humanism.

Evanoff: Is that the term that you would use—ecological humanism?

Biehl: Yes, as a social ecologist I would use the term ecological humanism.

Evanoff: How do you feel about the term ecofeminism in general?

Biehl: It gets into too many of these illogicalities.

Evanoff: But if you use the term ecological humanism, there's no feminism in it.

Biehl: That would be a concern for me if I accepted that in the past, now, and forever that which is human is that which is male. But I don't accept that. I'm not willing to accept a division of human beings along gender lines, along ethnic or religious lines, or any other kind of lines. I think I have much more in common with every other human being on this planet than I do with any creature that's not human. The differences are being enormously magnified these days. In the academy, at least, where ecofeminism has its major redoubt now, there are careers at stake with many of these ideas. I myself am not in the academy; I'm not a professor; and I'm glad I'm not because a person's career becomes invested with a certain idea. You can't change it without endangering your prospects for tenure, i.e., lifetime guaranteed employment which, you know, nobody else in this society has.

It's remarkable how pervasive ecofeminist clichés have become in this society as a whole. Every now and then I pick up a romance novel—these are the novels that are dedicated to emotional eroticism for women—and find that one of the appealing things about women these days is that they love nature so much. I looked at one recently in which a woman was using tarot cards and finding all sorts of mystical appeals to nature there. Ecofeminist ideas, far from being liberatory for women and nature or posing a danger to the social system, are actually becoming clichés in the general culture. They're quite common. Pagan ideas of a woman-centered goddess theology are being taught in divinity and theology schools now in this country. Conferences are held, sponsored by the Presbyterian Church and so on, that talk about these wholly non-Christian ideas such as goddess worship.

Part 2

Evanoff: Could you give a little background on some of the criticisms you made in your book about goddess religion?

Biehl: In the mystification of women having a “special” relationship to nature, it's become in a sense a religion or what is called a spirituality. Since it has priestesses and seems to be taking on more and more form, I would call it a religion, a goddess religion. This is the idea that in earlier times—in pre-Christian, pre-ancient-Greek times, in

Western Europe and also among native Americans in North America—people didn't worship a male deity that was a god of war and destruction, but rather a female deity. Somehow the worship of this goddess, who was supposed to be a mother goddess and an earth goddess even though anthropology may tell us that she was a fire goddess or the peely goddess of a volcano—these all sort of merged together now into one big goddess, the Earth Mother Goddess. The idea is that by worshipping the Earth Mother Goddess, we will overcome the depredations that especially the Christian religion has foisted on women and nature. The worship of the Goddess is the religious alternative to Christianity. It's manifest in neo-paganism or the revival of witchcraft in a positive sense.

My criticism of this is basically similar to the criticism that social ecology makes of deep ecology. In the writings of Arne Næss, the founding father of deep ecology who coined the word, you will find that what deep ecology means is asking deeper questions. Næss came out of logical positivism and the Vienna Circle earlier in this century and his way of thinking is very much along those lines—nothing mystical at all about it, by the way. When you see a dam being built or toxic wastes being dumped, you ask, why? The reason might be because this corporation did that. Næss wants you to ask why again. But why did this corporation do that? You might answer, well, because we live in a capitalist society. But why do we live in a capitalist society, Næss would want you to ask. Well, why? Because of the ideas that underlie capitalism. Næss's deep ecology is about asking why. You keep pressing an issue until you get to the very deepest explanation. In Næss's deep ecology, which has been accepted by many people in the ecology movement in the United States and in the academy, the deepest answer you can give to the question why such-and-such an environmental catastrophe is happening, is not because of the society, not because of capitalism, not because of the things that social ecology would stop with. No. Deep ecology says there's a deeper level beyond that, which is the philosophical and especially the religious underpinnings. In other words, the deepest level of understanding why this is happening to us now is the Judeo-Christian religion, the philosophical ideas of Descartes and so on—that is the deepest level.

Social ecology and deep ecology developed separately, but ironically they came to these two very different levels of analysis, because social ecology argues that the domination of human by human came first and gave rise to the idea of dominating nature, as found in the Judeo-Christian tradition, for example. Deep ecology, in saying that the deepest level is not the social—that's only medium-deep—but religion itself. It is saying that the primary and ultimate cause is our ideas or religion and that the social is only secondary. In effect, it's saying the opposite of what social ecology says. It's saying that the idea of dominating nature came first and gave rise to the kind of social system we are ultimately living under now. Insofar as social ecology's key formulation is that the domination of human by human came first, deep ecology reverses that. These were parallel developments. One was not responding to the other.

Now ecofeminism, in looking at goddess worship and making a religious analysis of the origins of the ecological crisis is basically taking the deep ecology approach. It's saying that religion, culture, and ideas are generative of the society. So somehow if we worship a goddess we will not only live in harmony with nature, but there will be no hierarchy, we will live in an equal society, there will be peace, and we will all love each other. It is claimed that it was the change in ideology, in the religion, that brought about what one writer calls the "Indo-European society in which we live today." The goddess-

worshipping ecofeminists rely on the work of an archaeologist named Marija Gimbutas who excavated some cultures in the Balkans, especially in former Yugoslavia, where she found what she thought was a lot of evidence of goddess worship. There were bird beaks, little cups. Something is shaped in a certain way that evokes female stereotypes: a cup, for example—that's obviously the womb! Gimbutas immediately saw this as goddess-related and female-related. There are some really striking bird images, animal images, and so on that were found, which she calls "goddesses." She also found in this society not much evidence of warfare, relative egalitarianism, and so forth. Since she is an archaeologist who is much more fixated than other archaeologists on the religious, she saw these relatively egalitarian and peaceful social relations in these old Balkan cultures as generated by goddess worship. Many other archaeologists have criticized her very, very bitterly for making these leaps—who's to say that these are even goddesses, let alone that goddess worship had anything to do with generating the culture as it is? But nonetheless the ideas that Gimbutas has propounded are quite popular among ecofeminists.

How did this goddess-worshipping culture come to an end? It's interesting that Gimbutas is of Lithuanian origin and during the time she was writing, of course, Lithuania was a state in the Soviet empire. I don't know how much an anti-Russian animus would have affected her ideas, but she saw the goddess-worshipping cultures as having been destroyed by mounted pastoral horsemen coming down from the steppes of Russia—you know, sort of like the tanks in '68 that destroyed the Prague Spring. Well, these mounted horsemen came down, worshipping gods that were sun gods rather than earth gods, that were war-loving and so on, and hierarchical with chieftains. They overran the goddess-worshipping cultures in the Balkans and that was the beginning of the process that led to the ecological crisis we are in today. In fact, one writer who has popularized Gimbutas's ideas, Charlene Spretnak, actually has this marvelous passage in one of her books where she says, "Imagine you are standing on a hill in the Balkans and you look out and you see horsemen approaching on the horizon, rushing toward you"—she sees this as the crossroads of civilization, as if this literally happened, of course without asking where the hierarchy among these horsemen came from and how that could have developed.

For these ecofeminists it's the shift in religions, rather than a cultural change or a social development, that generated the hierarchical, anti-ecological society in which we live. I think my criticism of that idea is pretty clear. I don't believe that religion is generative in this way, although this is not to say that social ecology focuses entirely on a material interpretation. Murray Bookchin talks about the importance of changes in consciousness as well as changing material conditions. I'm not trying to portray deep ecology and ecofeminism as entirely philosophically idealistic while social ecology is wholly materialistic in the tradition of Marxism. I'm not trying to make that dichotomy but I'm talking here more about a sense of emphasis. Whereas social ecology tries to present a rounded approach that understands the need for both a change in consciousness and a change in material conditions, ecofeminism, like deep ecology, tends to overemphasize the importance of a personal transformation or a transformation in individual beliefs, like much new age thought, as ultimately being the force that can change society.

Evanoff: Given the fact that you've made quite a few critical remarks in your book, what kind of response have you received back from people for it?

Biehl: The ecofeminist establishment came down on me with a very loud crash, especially in the larger periodicals. Probably the largest leftish periodical in the United States is called *The Nation*, and even though they are supposedly leftish they have admitted into their pages a lot of new age and ecofeminist approaches. Their reviewer lambasted my book for leaving out this and that—even accusing me of leaving out things that I actually talked about. The most popular criticism that has been made of my book is to criticize me for omitting those ecofeminists who understand that these ideas are social constructions. They have to be relying on the fact that people are not going to be reading my book as a result of the review in order to be believed, because I spend a great deal of time on that, even more than I've talked about here. I talked about manipulations of beliefs and how cynical and manipulative it is to make use of an idea that you yourself don't believe but which you condescendingly expect other people to believe because they have to have something to believe in—rather than taking a humanistic approach which sees people as capable of understanding and dealing with the truth. They're adults. But unfortunately many people don't read books in American society today and are happy to go with book reviews.

The best reviews I've had, though, have been in the smaller periodicals—little community, feminist, and university periodicals—where there was more of a willingness to accept or even to think about some of the criticisms that I've raised, and to actually express some kind of public sympathy with what I was saying, or at least parts of what I was saying. I thought the book was going to be blackballed and ignored, but it has percolated. There are people who are looking for an alternative. Actually it's only been in the past six months or so that I'm beginning to hear from people. My publisher has been forwarding to me the first positive letters I've gotten. I met a couple of people at the Institute for Social Ecology this summer who came in great part because they were interested in my book. It's being quoted in other places now as a respectable criticism of ecofeminism. So I think that the fortunes of that book will be improving. I hope people will have a chance to read it. Who knows? Maybe it will be translated into Japanese.

Evanoff: One thing that I think would appeal to male readers of your book is the fact that it seems to give space to men. A lot of ecofeminist writing seems to be very anti-male and men tend to develop a defensive response towards that. How do you feel about that? I wonder, however, if there might also be a criticism from feminists that you've broken ranks with feminism.

Biehl: I can't say that I've gotten that kind of criticism so much, although some critics were confused about where the feminism was. If I didn't make it primary, then where was it? It can't be serious. When I say that I think we are all in this struggle together to make an ecological society, I'm talking about a humanism. But then I also say that insofar as women are oppressed, that also has to be eliminated because we are opposed to eliminate hierarchy altogether. Somehow that latter idea doesn't carry the weight; it gets lost; it's not noticed. It's like advertising—you have to have it in very big letters or no one's going to notice it.

I also criticized, incidentally, the ecofeminist idea that the oppression of women is primary. This is the idea that the mother of all oppressions is the oppression of women by men, dating back to the receding mists of time, and that men learned how to dominate

from dominating women. As such, if we can eliminate what is called the primary oppression—the oppression of women—somehow that is the key to eliminating all hierarchy. Never mind that this is a very ahistorical approach. These other forms of domination certainly do exist, they have acquired a weight of their own, and they are not at all dependent on the domination of women. Ecofeminists tend not to notice—or not to want to notice—that men do dominate other men very seriously and always have. Capitalism today in its own right is not even particularly dependent upon the domination of women. In fact, on the contrary, in conjunction with the emergence of the feminist movement in this country since the '60s, the economy has actually more and more required women to go out into the workforce and get a job, whether they want to or not, just because two incomes are necessary to support a family in this culture. It's an ironic twist of fate that even as feminists were demanding entry into the workplace, the economy was requiring that they do so.

The domination of women is not necessary for capitalism; sometimes the opposite is the case. Of course, women are dominated as women but also as part of the capitalist and statist society in which we live. This overemphasis on the domination of women by men can also distract us from the extent to which women are also oppressed by the state and capitalism in their own rights, which also oppresses men. Not just domestic abuse, wife beating, and so on—there are larger ways in which women are oppressed. Having women cops, as Susan Brown-Miller wants us to do, and simply integrating hierarchies in order to eliminate domestic abuse, wife beating, and so on is not going to eliminate the problem. It will eliminate something that's very bad maybe, but the range of problems to which women are exposed is not solely limited to domestic abuses and so on, as horrible as they are.

I just finished doing a study of American radicalism for a course that I was teaching. One thing that I was very struck by, especially among the immigrant groups that came in around the turn of the century which were paid pennies a day, sometimes a week, to work in the factories of the robber barons and rampaging capitalists in this country, was how adept and clever the capitalists were at manipulating ethnic groups against each other. Especially when they were trying to break strikes, it's very remarkable how capitalists played the ethnic animosities against each other in order to break the ranks of solidarity—because they knew how strong an Italian's hatred for a Serb, for example, could be, just by virtue of ethnicity. During the Great Steel Strike of 1919, the steel trust had hired a lot of operatives to break up the strike, and they handed out a flier which instructed the operatives to play on the ethnic animosities, to tell the Italians that the Serbs were going back to work and taking their jobs, using the most clever, pernicious, and manipulative ways. The powers-that-were then, like the powers-that-be now, are very happy to foment dissension among people who, if they were unified, would pose a threat. Actually they succeeded in breaking the Great Steel Strike of 1919.

I see a similar thing happening today. The fixation on identity politics that makes you feel bad because you're a man and that says I can't work with you because you're a man—this is absurd. We need to be working together. While there are differences, while there are oppressions, it's our common problem that needs to bind us to each other in the same kind of solidarity that those steelworkers were aiming for but failed to sustain in their strike. The powers-that-be are very happy to see us divided.

Evanoff: How do you view the separatist tendency within feminism?

Biehl: I think that it's real important for women to get together and talk about their common problems. Sometimes women feel very inhibited if a man is in the room and they want to talk to other women about, say, sexual problems or domestic abuse. And I think that's fine; I think they should do that. But that's group therapy or psychotherapy; it's not politics. In a political group there is absolutely no reason why a man who is against domestic abuse or any kind of oppression of women should not be part of that group. In the early days of the feminist movement in the United States—at the Seneca Falls Convention of 1848, at all the various state conventions, and in the suffrage movement after that—it was a matter of course that sympathetic men were accepted. There was no separatism, no exclusiveness. Engravings from that time show sympathetic men sitting there along with the women, in full agreement that the laws that made women basically civilly dead in the United States had to be eliminated. They were working together in a political movement and there's no reason why they shouldn't. I understand that women do need to talk to each other about problems that they're having sometimes, but—and I'm violating the precept that the personal is the political here—let's not confuse psychotherapy with politics. We need all the allies that we can get.

Evanoff: Could you give us background on the idea of the personal as the political?

Biehl: The personal as the political is a slogan that was developed in 1969 or '70 in the early radical feminist movement in this country. It has spread around the world and I'm sure it's not unheard of in Japan. It was meant as a tool of analysis to show that the problems which politics needs to address are not only the problems of our common public sphere but also problems that exist in the home. Wife battering, for example, is political. The personal is the political rightly argued that a political movement needs to address this. And it does; it absolutely does.

Unfortunately that slogan, which had that very precise meaning, has undergone a transformation of meaning—the way so many slogans and ideas change their meanings as they get spread around and people use them for different things and think about them in different ways. Now the personal is the political has come to mean that the personal is prior to the political. There are actually writers who use it in that way, who use it as a justification for only personal change—for example, seeing a purely lifestyle change or a change in one's buying habits at the coop as political acts. Only in the most deluded sense of the political can one see it that way. Instead of being a tool of analysis, it has become a justification for lifestyle changes as a form of politics. That's not what was intended at all. Gloria Steinem, a feminist from the '60s in this country who has maintained a high profile liberal-to-radical feminist image, wrote in one of her recent books that it's time to reverse the slogan and say the political is the personal. This has come so far from the original meaning that it's really appalling.

These days there's so much emphasis on lifestyle among people who really do want to change society but can't see how to do it. More and more the political is identified with the state and the state is universally vilified. The U.S. Congress is now trying to develop a health care plan, but the general reaction of so many people in this country is that anything the state tries to do can't possibly go right. There's a blanket rejection not just of the state, but of the political insofar as the state is identified with the political. What Murray Bookchin means by the political—in the sense of face-to-face

democracy, as the public realm—is absolutely crucial to social ecology or any kind of a democratic participatory ecological society. But instead today the alternatives are that the state embodies the political, which is to be vilified, so we will turn to personal change. We will change our lifestyle, change our religion, worship the goddess—that’s what we will do to make for social change. Well, I know that it may seem that the Left is very much in retreat these days all over the world, but somehow it doesn’t seem to me that simply because the Soviet Union collapsed that we have to give up socialism. By socialism I mean libertarian socialism, not state socialism.

Evanoff: You make a distinction between the *oikos*, or the household, and the *polis*, or the public sphere. What concrete strategies are there for getting women into the public sphere?

Biehl: Well, I didn’t make the distinction between *oikos* and *polis*—Aristotle did! And he said that women had to stay in the *oikos*. This was of concern to me because ecofeminists were emphasizing the *oikos*, and the fact that etymologically the word ecology comes from *oikos*, the household. This is seen as justification for the affinity between women as mistresses of the household and women as ecological saviors and mentors.

As for concrete strategies: Form an affinity group. Form a political group. Draw up a program. Educate yourselves, especially about libertarian municipalism and social ecology. Engage in public activity around all the issues of concern, whether it’s a toxic waste dump in your area or battered women—organize on all these different levels. Run a libertarian municipalist campaign calling for the democratization of the city charter. And do the best you can to create the kind of confederal dual power that Murray Bookchin has described. My prescription for women is no different from my prescription for men.

People who are interested in keeping track of the discussion not only on ecofeminism but on social ecology in general can subscribe to the periodical, *Green Perspectives*, put out several times a year. The editorial collective includes Murray Bookchin, Janet Biehl, and JEM’s own Mariko Todo.