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The separation from nature and separated subjects: critical investigations with Theodor W. Adorno and Françoise d'Eaubonne

In this article I open a dialogue between Theodor W. Adorno and Françoise d'Eaubonne to analyse how the Western self-proclaimed separation from nature is indissociable from the naturalisation of separated others. I focus on the reification of the identity category "woman" as a cipher for explaining the collusion between domination and social reproduction. I argue that claims of separation are, at bottom, claims of domination associated with a repression of those claims. I end the paper by showing how designing a collective project of emancipation that incorporates the need for ecological balance is impossible without continuing the enterprises of denaturalisation, and without focusing on political agency and the liberation of subjectivities.

Keywords: separation, reification, gender, social reproduction, nature

In recent years, Adorno's philosophy has been widely reinvested in dialogue with critical feminist theories – and, among those, with ecofeminism.[1] While materialist ecofeminists have underlined conceptual lineages with the first generation of the Frankfurt School (Salleh 1988, Mills 1991, Plumwood

1 For a general sense of the dialogues between Adorno and feminist theories, see Heberle 2006.

1993, Merchant 2008),[2] contemporary secondary studies have emphasised the affinities in their genealogical and structural analysis of the dual domination of nature and Others (Vuillerod 2021, Bernstein 2024).

Nevertheless, differential aspects of subjection and social domination are most of the time obscured for the sake of clarifying grand narratives about planetary destruction, and the necessary collective ("human") realisation of the catastrophe.[3] If the Frankfurt school rightly postulated a connection between social domination, subjection, and the domination of nature, it is vain to argue for ecological projects without analysing how the so-called "separation from nature" is caught up in relations of power and domination, and how it collides with subjective formation and social organisations.

I propose that we open a critical dialogue between Adorno and Françoise D'Eaubonne, who was the first to promote an "ecological feminism" within Western frameworks. If D'Eaubonne did not substantially engage with Adorno, scattered mentions across her theoretical work indicate that she read and mobilised Adorno's ideas for her own thinking (Marcuse is also regularly cited).[4] To be sure, D'Eaubonne's and Adorno's projects are very different: while Adorno understood theory as radical practice and was suspicious of mass political movements, D'Eaubonne, an activist and revolutionary writer, affirmed the urgency of a "mutation" of the whole "world system" via an international feminist revolution.

However, by scrutinising their own "damaged life" – as per the subtitle to Adorno's *Minima Moralia* – both of them manage to extricate the more general traits of a damaging social reproduction, that is, one that relies on the suffering of many for the interests of a few. Tracking how the hegemony of a false universal creates mystifications of reality and impostures of equality, their dialogue opens a critical reflection on the self-proclaimed "separation from nature" in the Western world, considered as the bedrock of the current ecological crisis. I argue that addressing this self-proclaimed separation is impossible without understanding the discourses on nature that naturalised and animalised Others. In this perspective, overcoming the ecological crisis requires not only material or class redistribution, but also guaranteeing the conditions for a collective exercise of political agency. Any reclaiming of our interdependencies with nature risks

2 For a presentation of the different currents of ecofeminism and their debates, see Gaard 2011.

3 See the first chapter ("We're not in this together") of *The Exhausted of the Earth*: "One of the most common misconceptions concerning climate change is that it produces or even requires a united humanity" (Chaudhary 2024: 11).

4 D'Eaubonne mentions Adorno in *Feminism or Death*, p. 182. And in *Écologie/féminisme. Révolution ou mutation?* (not translated), p. 216. See bibliography for complete references.

furthering dominations if it is not accompanied, in tension, with a moment of critique, with an historicisation of the discourses on nature and a politics of non-identity.[5]

First, I will present a general diagnosis of the collusion between domination and social reproduction by using shared insights from Adorno and d'Eaubonne, and in particular, their use of the concept of reification. Then, I will critically examine their genealogies of the "separation from nature", focusing on its gendered and racialized aspects, before retrieving the political implications of this multifaceted separation for contemporary ecological projects.

Reification, domination and social reproduction

Despite different writing styles, Adorno and D'Eaubonne share a critical impulse: to examine how mechanisms of domination are woven into collective conditions of existence. Because they are opaquely interlaced with mechanisms of domination, and because domination works by concealing the suffering it produces, conditions of life are hardly examined beyond their immediacy.[6]

In a synthetising formula, Adorno declares that "the reproduction of life and its suppression form a unity" (Adorno [1942] 2021: 81). The exaggeration serves here to interrupt the order of things, to breach the self-evidence that commands business-as-usual. But when life on Earth is now explicitly menaced by annihilation through fossil-fuel capitalism, Adorno's exaggeration takes on a new, urgent actuality, echoed in D'Eaubonne's *Feminism or Death*. We must ask: what are the conditions of social reproduction, and why do they tend to equate life with its suppression? By "social reproduction", I refer here to the historical conditions that preside over the reproduction of social roles, institutions and practices, rather than to a heavily normative conception (synonym with sustainability) or to the bundle of reproductive activities (as opposed to productive ones).[7]

5 The idea of "reclaim" was popularised by North-American ecofeminists who believe the ecofeminist movement finds important political resources in the reappropriation of the ties between nature and women (often referred to as a "reversal of the stigma"), and in the recovery of more direct and spiritual experiences of nature, escaping an instrumental and capitalist relationship to living beings. See Plant 1989, and a helpful review of the book in Gruen 1991.

6 By "immediacy", I mean in an Adornian fashion that conditions of life are not traced back to the social mediations that form and inform them, but rather, are believed to be the product of either eternal human nature or pure individual factors.

7 See, for social reproduction as reproductive work in Marxist-feminists approaches: Bhattacharya (Ed) 2017. Also see for social reproduction and sustainability in ecofeminist approaches: Mies and Shiva 1993; Mies 1986.

Adorno and D'Eaubonne agree that understanding this damaging reproduction of life cannot be reduced to the material exploitation of human labour and natural resources under capitalism. The classic Marxian theme of the separation between use and exchange value, at the source of the concept of reification, is extended by both Adorno and D'Eaubonne.[8] Originally, this separation of use and exchange value mystifies the *social nature* of the relation of production, making it seem like the product of this relation appeared spontaneously (Marx 1990 [1867]: 165). But the law of capitalist exchange not only mystifies the historical and social nature of interactions: it demands the loss of particularities for categorial interchangeability. This loss of particularity emerges from the mode of reason that became hegemonic with Enlightenment modernity. Hence, while instrumental reason commands the systematic forgetting of particularities through identity-thinking, the mode of production (capitalism) institutionalises that systematic forgetting through commensurable exchange and equivalence.

For both authors, then, the capitalist social order needs the domination of nature and Others to reproduce itself, both *materially* (it needs the free exploitation of "raw materials" *and* enslaved labour to sustain production and consumption cycles) and *culturally* (it needs to consider nature as dead matter *and* to dehumanise difference as otherness). The actual mediations between society and nature are opacified by eternising discourses supporting the interests of domination (e.g. "we always needed to dominate nature to survive"). Also opacified are the *social meanings* that come to define those who represent the "naturality" of nature within society.

The "profit motive" (Adorno) – or the "profitability principle" (d'Eaubonne) – becomes "the factor by means of which society reproduces its own existence" (Adorno 2008 [2003]: 9). This profit motive creates an antagonistic society: a society that functions not despite its contradictions but *by virtue* of its contradictions. The profit motive organises society yet divides it and potentially "tears it apart". Both principles underlying the profit motive (instrumental reason and identity-thinking) are tied back to

> [. . .] the principle of mastery, the mastery of nature, which spreads its influence, which continues in the mastery of men by other men and which finds its mental reflex in the principle of identity, by which I mean the intrinsic aspiration of all mind to turn every alterity that is introduced to it or that it encounters into something like itself and in this way to draw it into its own sphere of influence (Adorno 2008 [2003]: 9).

8 See Loslier and Ahmed 2023.

Hence the crucial relation between social domination, subjection and the domination of nature: all of these are "dominations" because they are relations of mastery that rely on both the conceptual reduction and material appropriation of what is postulated as "other". In capitalist social forms, these dominations come together specifically for the sake of profit, but the motive of profit does not exhaust the analysis. Indeed, otherness is not defined, distributed and experienced in the same way across societies. The relations between social domination, subjection and the domination of nature are not monolithic: interacting between these three poles, we find different historical regimes of power-knowledge, as well as different hierarchical treatments of bodies and beings. This is why we need to investigate how the principle of mastery is backed up by *definitional* claims that are really *normative* claims, hierarchising beings and reality.

Reified categories of identity are *ciphers* for understanding how social domination, subjection and the domination of nature function together. Focusing on the assignation of some human beings to the fixed category of identity "woman", D'Eaubonne argues that this assignation of identity is *as necessary as material exploitation* for the reproduction of a damaging social order. This assignation of identity, in its multiple modalities, points to the way in which societies organise the reproduction of human lives, and how they conceive their relationship with nature. Looking at what defines otherness (what it needs to be socially separated) tells us about how the relation between internality/exteriority, universal/particular, and human/less-than-human are defined.

That certain bodies are assigned to carry the weight of all human life reproduction, from sexual reproduction to activities of maintenance and care, is not a "women's problem", but rather the core of the ecological crisis, understood as a crisis of the organisation of human life on Earth. Similarly, that those bodies are denied autonomy and are subordinated by male-dominated social orders (of which we find diverse yet continuous examples in different parts of the world[9]), is not a "secondary problem", but rather an indication of a systematic issue in how gender relations are reified. Hence, turning historical social relationships into ontological justifications, processes of reification prevent us from seeing (and thus changing) the mediations that define our destructive relationships with nature and others.

9 D'Eaubonne summarises her critical trajectory as such: "Starting at real-life events, at radical subjectivity, her experience as a species treated as a minority, separated, reified, *looked at*, a woman of my generation discovers that her "little problem," her "secondary question," this so-minute detail of the subversive front, indeed, her "fragmentary struggle," is no longer content to link with but identifies directly with the number-one question, with the original problem; the basis, even, of the indispensable need to change the world, not just to improve it, but *so that there can still be a world*" (2022 [1974]: 220) [emphasis original).

At the global level, the reproduction of human life became "absurd", as the question of the satisfaction of human needs "coincides with the question of the suffering of the vast majority of all humans on earth" (Adorno [1942] 2021: 81). Adorno's argument is that the attained level of production, technology and global wealth *could end* this absurd reproduction of suffering. This incapacity relies on a "process of denial" that "performs a distracting function" (Adorno [1942] 2021: 80). Denial distracts us from the fact that this society "maintains itself through the needs of those at its mercy" (Adorno [1942] 2021: 81). Conditions of human-life reproduction are also conditions of human-life exploitation. This is what Adorno means when he talks about the "unity of life with its suppression". Hence, a simple redistribution of either "the geographical, social or sexual actual state of productivity" (D'Eaubonne 2023 [1978]: 284) will only reshape the relations of domination rather than radically change the conditions of life.

At the subjective level, subjects are living within contradictions for which there is no easy way out. A "damaged" life, then, is one that is forced to participate in a system that relies on mass poverty, mechanised exploitation and death, the persecution of difference, and the destruction of other living beings and ecological habitats for its continuation. The necessity to keep going in a system that relies on the indifference to other's suffering (and to one's own) fosters attitudes of contemplation and indifference. The impact on the constitution of subjectivities is largely underestimated, as well as the impact on the creation of authoritarian personalities and reactionary social discourses. Anyone who rejects the rules of the reified game is pressured by threats of social violence, and painted as obscurantists. In such social conditions, the omnipresence of injustices enjoins a general accomodation with them – even "the obviousness of disaster becomes an asset to its apologists" (Adorno 2020 [1951]: §149).

The values associated with the category "woman" (which form what d'Eaubonne calls the "condition of feminitude") tell us not so much about the diversity of women's experience or situations of oppression, but rather illuminates the contradictions within a society's treatment of what it sees as external to it. Humans assigned to womanhood inhabit a life characterised by the constant wrestling with a reified categorisation, opposed to the "universal" or "neutral" subject. D'Eaubonne asks: "Is *that* me?" [*C'est moi, ça ?*]" (D'Eaubonne 2022

[1974]: 46).[10] An agentive reappropriation of the ambivalences contained within the category of "woman" would expose the contingency of the patriarchal and heteronormative order and its collusion with social reproduction.

The fixed identity "woman" reifies women as objects of spectacle, but also as reproductive instruments and natural care-givers. This dual assignation obeys two laws: the "law of pleasing" (*la loi de plaire)* and the law of exchange, in which women are exchange currencies (laws that pre-date and inform the workings of capitalist societies). So, for d'Eaubonne, the reifications of the identity "woman" are most pre-eminently "woman-as-pleasing-object" and "woman-as-commodity". This is why d'Eaubonne argues that we should not let go of the fundamental ambiguity in our theoretical use of the terms "sex" and "sexual". With d'Eaubonne, we must hold together both threads of the analysis, that of the sexual-erotic and that of the sexual-socioeconomic:

> Also, we must never let go of either of the two ends of the cord: when we explain and analyze the causes of the feminine slavery economically as "invisible work" (…) we must never forget the oppression of Eros, the sexual question, woman reified and degraded as merchandise or spectacle, condemned to reproduce in spite of herself; when we fight for our sexual freedom and for the free dispositions of our bodies, we must keep in mind our condition as proletariat overexploited outside and "invisible worker" inside (d'Eaubonne 2022 [1974]: 169) [translation modified[11]].

While D'Eaubonne inherits the Beauvoirian analysis of women's alienation, she also exceeds it. She is influenced by the French materialist Christine Delphy, and the Italian activist and writer Carla Lonzi (d'Eaubonne 2022 [1974]: 163-6 and 154-6). From Delphy's materialist analysis *The Main Enemy* (1970), she retains that women's oppression is not merely an ideological survivance in capitalism; on the contrary, the institutions of legal marriage and the heterosexual family come to serve capitalism's interests by prolonging women's oppression. From Lonzi's *Spit on Hegel* (1970), she retains that women's oppression is also a cancellation of

10 D'Eaubonne writes that she became conscious of herself through the filter of misogyny, this "primal matter of the world where I had to live, and that separated me from it" (D'Eaubonne 92022: 18). Relating to the world while being assigned to be a "woman" means that this relating is *at the same time* a separation. This separation is therefore "the crucial aspect of womanhood", but it is not restrictive to womanhood. For example, d'Eaubonne takes Albert Memmi's writings on the situation of Jews as disclosing a similar separation.

11 Occurrences of "reified" or "reification" in the original French have been translated into different expressions, e.g. here as "woman as object" (or, on p. 58, "the very natural concretisation of woman", instead of the "very natural reification of woman". This tends to obscure the conceptual ties with the Frankfurt school.

their erotic life and a repression of desire. This is also why she writes that "*we don't only liberate sex alone, but the body, of which this sex is a part*" (d'Eaubonne 2022 [1974]: 171) [translation modified]. As many philosophers have showed after d'Eaubonne, the cultural is never "merely cultural": regimes of heteronormative sexuality and regimes of division of labour co-constitute and inform each other.[12]

The profit motive is therefore indissociable from a "repressive morality". D'Eaubonne argues:

> Overly repressive, dedicated to the principle of production and of reality, [society] can only offer secret softening of the repression, piecemeal moral reforms, a sex fair in Copenhagen instead of a radical questioning of lifestyle. But, as long as male power prevails, it goes without saying that nothing will change in this area, and that *the very origin of the conditions of life . . .* has no reason to be re-examined (d'Eaubonne 2022 [1974]: 96) [translation modified].

For readers of *Minima Moralia*, this passage may be as close as it gets to Adorno's micrologic critique of the reified conditions of life. Both Adorno and D'Eaubonne examine the concealments and pretences that *feign to allow greater freedom*, when in fact they only impede the radical rethinking of our conditions of life. As subjects seek to alleviate the psychic costs of their inescapable participation in a damaging social reproduction, they find refuge in the illusion of self-sufficiency, as well as in conforming social practices, which then tend to be equated with subjectivity itself.[13] Adorno thus condemns "the fact that to a great extent the subject came to be an ideology, a screen for society's objective functional context and *a palliative for the subjects' suffering under society*" ([1966] 2007: 66). Returning to D'Eaubonne, as the (self-sufficient) subject becomes a "palliative" to the suffering induced by a damaging social reproduction, the distilled "sexual reforms" also function as a palliative for erotic and socioeconomic repressions. The "little fixes" of the repressive system are designed to maintain the *status quo* of social reproduction.

Therefore, to re-examine the very origins of our conditions of life, both Adorno and d'Eaubonne argue that we need to track how societies and subjects became separated from both internal and external nature. I now turn to their genealogies of this "separation from nature", and how they relate it to separated subjects.

12 I am referring to Judith Butler's article "Merely Cultural", in which they argued against that understanding of sexuality and gender as secondary systems, which would have no bearing on the understanding of economic processes such as the division of labour.

13 See, for example, Adorno [1951] 2020 §5, §18, §92.

The "separation from nature" and separated subjects

In D'Eaubonne's genealogy, the domination of nature and of women start with two concomitant events: the mastery of Earth's fertility by heavy agricultural practices, and that of women's reproductive functions by men. These two relations of appropriation are then solidified by *paternal lineage*, understood as men's propriety over the child and over the land. From this perspective, capitalism's destruction of nature is only a later stage of the phallocratic separation from nature. The price of progress *is* the "price of phallocracy": it first created new regimes of temporality and spatiality characterised by separation, which negated the possibilities for free and equal inhabitance. Those in possession of the phallus (the established symbol of power) claimed the lives of those appropriated (d'Eaubonne [1974] 2022: 212). The capitalist system only multiplied alienation by organising these relations into a global network.

While d'Eaubonne's genealogy opens up a lot of unresolved problems, I think she is right to emphasise the role of the capture of *time* and *desire*, and how this generates unequal possibilities of inhabitance. In their latest forms, capitalist cycles of production and consumption become "[a] fraud aimed at time, which is the framework of life, at sensitivity, which is its valuable side, a gigantic, planetary, monstruous frustration" (d'Eaubonne [1974] 2022: 218) [translation modified]. Time is captured by imperatives of production, since one must sell one's labour-power in order to survive – but also, it is alienated in what Adorno would call the reified opposition between "labour-time" and "free" or "leisure time" (Adorno 2020 [1951]: §84 and §113). Further, spaces are divided for the profit of capitalist circuits, at the expense of their inhabitants. This division of spatiality is not only a price of phallocratism, but also directly inherited from colonial enterprises, which d'Eaubonne largely ignores.[14] Desire is captured by imperatives of consumption, creating short-term demands for new products that create massive air, water, and land pollution – sensitivity is rejected as childish and obsolete. The ecological crisis we are living through is, for d'Eaubonne, the ending of a cycle that was born with appropriation over land and bodies, justified as "progress".

14 In the recent preface to the new edition, Myriam Bahaffou and Julie Gorecki note that d'Eaubonne problematically dismisses the resistances that emerge from other sites than those characterised by the prevalence of white, integrated, women, and thus neglects the analysis of colonisation and racism that were in fact disponible at the time when d'Eaubonne was writing. Unfortunately, in many passages, she demonstrates a paternalism largely permeated by racist ideologies. As the authors summarise: "d'Eaubonne's ambitious attempt to elaborate a transnational critique of women's oppression fails, because it is not accompanied by a solid, systematic theory of world-relations" (d'Eaubonne [1974] 2022: 25) [my translation].

The dual domination of both women and nature is solidified when the "separation from nature" comes to be definitional for the position of a universal subject":

> [. . .] historical link between the exploitation of the biosphere and the enslavement of women, at the same time "human beings" and "nature" in a world where man defines himself by his *separation from nature* and exploits it only through his own division into classes" (d'Eaubonne 2023 [1978]: 176).

D'Eaubonne's analysis clarifies that. Enterprises of domination justified in terms of "progress" rely on a demarcation between who is plainly "human" (the recognised historical subjects of Western civilisation) and who comes to incarnate nature within humanity.[15] Women were always associated with nature to justify their oppression, but Western modernity *recodes* the associations of women and nature in order to reinforce enterprises of domestication and the pursuit of profit. Women are then *ambivalently* associated with nature's purity and virginity, and/or with nature's savageness and animality a distribution that maps alongside racial criteria.

Historical subjects come to *define themselves* by this separation from nature – and, by extension, from embodiment and sensibility. The definition of a *universal subject* by the separation from nature comes into full view in Adorno's and Horkheimer's retelling of the myth of Odysseus in the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. Contrary to popular readings, they do not ground an ahistorical or general theory of subjectivity, but they attempt to invert the accepted idea that Enlightenment got rid of myths. Adorno and Horkheimer's thesis is that the Enlightenment *reverts into myth*; hence, they tell the myth of the universal, self-sufficient subject through Odysseus, as it constitutes the most powerful myth at the centre of the Enlightenment.

Odysseus manages to access a unified and manipulable subjectivity by opposing the external forces of nature. But that unification of an internal heterogeneity only arises at the cost of separating himself from his own embodiment. This is, for the authors, the "real" price of progress: the separation that determines the constitution of a unitary subjectivity. This is why the authors argue that "with the denial of nature in human beings, not only the *telos* of the external mastery of nature but also the *telos* of one own's life becomes confused and opaque"

15 After d'Eaubonne, this historical link will be examined in-depth. For example, Carolyn Merchant's study *The Death of Nature* demonstrates how, within Western modernity, the exploitation of nature's resources and the oppression of women possess shared material and cultural roots in the development of scientific positivism and capitalist extractivism.

(Adorno and Horkheimer 2002 [1944]: 43). The separation of human beings from themselves (the "nature in them") corresponds to our common condition as bodily, sensible beings. From this follows our constitutive *interdependence*, that is, our material dependence on external things (e.g. air, food) and on relations of care to survive and flourish, as well as our cultural dependence on meaning-giving categories and collective institutions. The separation from our internal nature primarily corresponds to a separation to what constitutes our life in common, which allows us not only to survive but also to strive for common goals. By forgetting the part of nature in them, subjects are not only repressing corporeality, and all the sensitive qualities that guarantee relationships to self, others, and the world; but they are also repressing what makes them individually and collectively capable of striving for mutual emancipation.

Nevertheless, the authors already described this universal subject as "patriarchal", hence, as falsely universal. To access this unified subjectivity for control, Odysseus successively defeats the Sirens and their mimetic inferiority and dangerousness (i.e. women's "mystical spirituality"), then defeats the beasts and savages that counter civilisation's march, and finally, organises a division of labour, in which some become his "collaborators", devoted to manual labour (they row the boat, while Odysseus commands it).

Therefore, two dimensions of separation coexist: a collective separation from nature for the sake of progress, "detectable in the earlier history of subjectivity" (Adorno and Horkheimer 2002 [1944]: 43), and a separation from nature as a definitional claim of those in power. On the one hand, we have self-proclaimed subjects who construct a project of society on their separation from nature, and, simultaneously but on the other side, we have those who participate in that project but in the roles of the separated Others, marked by inferiority. Hence, the actual separation is less between humans beings and an abstract nature, then between those who are recognised as *historical* subjects and those who come to incarnate nature, lesser human beings, or irrational animals.

In the universal subject dissected by Adorno, the split is internal: there is a dissociation from the sensibility that informs *all processes of socialisation* within Western societies. To thrive in that social organisation, Adorno argues, subjects become separated. They learn to separate their instrumental faculties from all the other faculties that cannot be put to profit. In a paragraph entitled "Novissimum organum", Adorno argues that the transformation of labour-power into commodity allowed a severance from the subject's own subjectivity.[16] The

16 A clear indictment of Bacon's philosophy – which, in the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, is analysed as the original patriarchal motive behind the "perfect match" of "men's mind" and nature, the linchpin of modern "progress".

living "made itself, as something living, a thing, an equipment" (Adorno 2020 [1951]: §147). By relating to oneself primarily as an object of production, the subject tends to manipulate their own character traits. This process of "morbid scission" in the subject evidently has an impact on thought and reflexivity. This social organisation anchors the idea that thought profits from the rejection of emotions, from memories, impulses, and imagination. Hence, "The will to live finds itself dependent on the denial of the will to live: self-preservation annuls all life in subjectivity" (Adorno 2020 [1951]: §147). The adaptation to that system is bought at the price of a dissociative stance: *all subjects*, in capitalist societies, experience this sort of general reduction and damaging of subjectivity.

On the other side, separated Others are the ones who pay the price of that mystification of the universal subject. They incarnate how this fraud of the separation from nature is entertained. Highlighting the regulative instances and the incorporations that preside over the making of this separation from nature as a legible organisation of the real, both authors demonstrate how this separation is *a claim to domination associated with a repression of that claim*.

Separation only reinforces a difference that was first *selected as a difference*, or that was *created as a difference*; thus, "*difference* (that is, alterity), is always at the expense of the differentiated," and "that which is *great*, thus embodying the universal, is necessarily the fact of the nonwoman"(d'Eaubonne 2022 [1974]: 61) [translation modified]. Oppression, for d'Eaubonne, is another word for "internalised repression". It is impossible to understand oppression without analysing the mechanisms of repression and denial that instate it. For example, at the end of the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* ([1944] 2002: 190-1), in a fragment entitled the "Price of Progress", the authors recall the doctor Pierre Flourens, who, in a letter, narrates his scruples about using chloroform to anaesthetise patients. Describing the state induced by the drug, Flourens writes that the patient is incapable of remembering what happened, but only feels a latent pain. Flourens talks of a "deception", entertained by the doctors, who prefer to keep silent on the effects of the medication and encourage its unlimited use. Adorno and Horkheimer write: "A suspicion would arise that our attitude toward human beings, and *toward all creatures*, is no different to that toward ourselves after a successful operation: *blindness to torment*" (Adorno and Horkheimer [1944] 2002: 191). The forgetting of suffering preserves the *status quo*.

Notice here that Adorno and Horkheimer talk of "all creatures"; it is not only an indifference to human but also to non-human lives. Flourens's letter is the allegory of a larger process: the civilisational operation is an operation of "vivisection". It is a living separation of subjects from their embodiment, creating a certain type of subjectivity. Thus, the choice of the term "vivisection" is not coincidental: it

attempts to capture the continuum between the very acceptability of performing operations on living animals and the social acceptance of mechanised, industrial death. Adorno and Horkheimer refer to the concentration camps, but other critical theorists have underlined similar ties of necessity between the animalisation of bodies, enterprises of colonisation and social death.[17]

The story of Saartje Baartman, an African woman enslaved, whose body was used for spectacle and later dissected in the name of science (by, notably, Georges Cuvier), underlines the crossing of regimes of Western knowledge-power, colonisation, and discourses on nature and animality.[18] The body of Saartje was described entirely as "animal", as displaying eternal characteristics of her sex and race. This scene, as many others, remind that the bodies of Black enslaved women were spectacularised and dehumanised by way of their un- or de-gendering.[19] Their animalisation not only justified the sacrifice of their lives (which were really understood as "non-lives"), but also sedimented the institutions of power-knowledge that, in the West, defined the true, universal human body in opposition to the perceived animal ones.

We can see the difficulty posed by the expression the "separation from nature". On the one hand, it does encapsulate a palpable reality, that is, a collective denial of our interdependencies with ecosystems, and a denial of embodiment and the materiality of the body. On the other hand, this "separation from nature" is also a Western narrative of self-constitution, which does not really say its name: there is not really a separation with nature because there are *concrete mediations with nature*, only in the modes of oppression and destruction.

Political agency and collective liberation

What both Adorno and d'Eaubonne wrestle with, then, is that within bourgeois, Western frameworks, discourses on nature inevitably carry with them the reified process of othering that grounded the self-proclaimed separation from nature. Whatever adjectives or periphrases we use to talk about nature, we are bound to get entangled in discourses justifying the separation of naturalized others. This is the meaning of Adorno's rapprochement of women and nature, which are most of the time wrongly interpreted as essentialist statements. They really point to a

17 See, for example, Franz Fanon's analysis of the gaze of the colonizer in *Black Skins, White Masks* (2021 [1952]). The connections between animalisation, colonisation, and racism is also the heart of Kaoutar Harchi's recent (2024), essay: *Ainsi l'animal et nous*.

18 See Harchi 2024.

19 See Spillers 1987; Hartman 1997.

social relation of oppression codified by gender, at the conceptual and material levels. For example, in the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, woman "stands for Nature, the substratum of an endless subsumption at the conceptual level, of an endless submission in reality" ; or "[w]here domination of nature is the true goal, biological inferiority remains the ultimate stigma, the weakness imprinted by nature, the mark which invites violence" (Adorno and Horkheimer 2002 [1944]: 87, 206). Or again, more developed, in *Minima Moralia*:

> The feminine character, and the ideal of femininity on which it is modelled, are products of masculine society. The image of undistorted nature arises only in distortion, as its opposite. Where it claims to be humane, masculine society imperiously breeds in woman its own corrective, and shows itself through this limitation implacably the master. The feminine character is a negative imprint of domination. But therefore equally bad. Whatever is in the context of bourgeois delusion called nature, is merely the scar of social mutilation (Adorno 2020 [1951], §59).

Adorno means that if the feminine character is a creation of the masculine society, then the values associated with this ideal of femininity (care, devotion, submissiveness…) cannot be taken as an antidote to end patriarchal violence or nature's domination. Rather, analyzing this postulated "feminine character" within its social configurations allows to critique the false universal on which it depends, and how a false humanity is then professed. Mills argues: "Woman's domination, according to Adorno, creates feminine characteristics that lead to an abnegative reconciliation with nature, a reconciliation that does not challenge domination but reinforces it" (Mills 1991: 174). There is no possible return to an undistorted nature through or within the categories of patriarchal and colonial domination. Discourses on nature, as Colette Guillaumin (1995) argued, are enmeshed in justifications for racist and sexist oppressions. The system of "marks" they imprint on bodies and which call for social mutilation have to be denaturalised to be resisted. What Mills calls an "abstract pro-nature stance" tends to forget the regressive moments that can be entwined in discourses of nature, which can be retrieved for the purposes of authoritarianism. Any relationship to nature that pretends to be pure, without mediations, and which then considers nature as the normative source of human values is bound to leap into authoritarianism. Thus, discourses on nature in the abstract are entangled with reified discourses of domination, specifically when they claim to avoid it. Even the categories that would prove to be outside those Western frames could not be *directly applied* or *simply translated* in order to protect an abstract nature.

D'Eaubonne, too, wrestles with the question of feminine values. She acknowledges that they are a product of domination. By talking of "feminine values", she deplores that she is condemned to use the "sexist language of the enemy"; these values were "attributed arbitrarily (and as a group) to the entirety of the feminine sex, in principle to be conserved, but in reality to be surveilled and stricken with impotence" (d'Eaubonne 2023 [1978]: 280). In some passages, D'Eaubonne attempts to differentiate between the condition of "feminitude", created by domination, and the "Feminine" (capitalized), which should be culturally rehabilitated as a non-biological aspiration to equality. She writes that "These values, placed before under the sign of the Feminine to be reduced to insignificance or negativity, will disappear as feminine, because they would be shared with the two sexes" (d'Eaubonne 2023 [1978]: 298). Relying on Marcuse's "Marxism and Feminism", D'Eaubonne argues for a new, "qualitatively different" mode of life, in which values previously enclosed in the "feminine character" would be liberated, hence would cease to feminine, because they would be finally be recognised as universal. This view relates to Adorno's idea that the "feminine character", as a product of masculine domination, needs to be overcome to liberate both women and the "fabrication" of nature as feminine.

However, contrary to Adorno, d'Eaubonne's critique is explicitly articulated to the designing of a political movement. She believes that a transnational movement of women must lead the change for a new world-system, that is, to end the domination of nature and others. While she recognizes that both men and women act in the same way under the hegemonic conditions of phallocentric power (just like Beauvoir), she argues that women are best placed to demand the abolition of power altogether. They would be the historical subject of "nonpower." Indeed, women's interests of liberation would coincide with the interests of the survival of the entire human species. This thought emerges from her reading of Carla Lonzi's *Spit on Hegel*, in which Lonzi calls for the union of women against patriarchal powers, not in virtue of any cultural or material proximity with nature, but because of a shared, productive desire for *another social project*, still in need of articulation.

The problem is that d'Eaubonne's reliance on women as the only enlightened subject neglects both the differential incorporations of domination that make "woman" an impossible homogenous category, and, most problematically, underestimates the colonial heritage and the construction of black women as ungendered, rather than gendered as "woman". Thus, she tends to obscure, as does Adorno, the constitution of a sex/gender order of things crucially tied, in modernity, with colonisation.

As Mills noted, Adorno's critique of Hegel's dialectical reconciliation in identity is still helpful to design a politics of non-identity that articulates emancipatory projects with ecological demands. The idea is not to attempt to reconciliate all emancipatory projects, but to be able to see their points of convergence as they share similar historical and conceptual motifs, opening paths for their common articulation. Instead of conflating irreducible experiences, a politics of non-identity aims to avoid an abstract, reconciliating term, postulated above all others. The category "human" often played this role within liberal humanism, as both Adorno and d'Eaubonne underline, because it ended up excluding most human beings, when it was not used to enforce hierarchies between human and non-human beings and justify violence.

Denaturalisation is not in the past: it is our ecological present. It attempts to liberate subjects, to set the conditions for the recognition of equal political agency, without which ecological projects risk regrounding inequality and unfreedom. As Fatima Ouassak argued, the ecological question is inseparable from the question of political agency, which also relates to questions of the organisation of public spaces and the concrete possibilities for political organisation. As Ouassak shows, popular neighbourhoods in France (marked by generations of immigration ensuing from French colonisation) are barred from creating ecological projects, as everything, from the urban disposition to the continuous rounds of police officers, is designed to prevent any type of political agentivity (Ouassak 44). Contemporary dominant ecological projects are mostly compatible with the capitalist-liberal order, which still demonstrates its concrete indifference to living beings, biodiversity, and habitability. They merely seek to preserve previous conditions of life for a minority.

In this sense, enterprises of "renaturalization" should not be understood as the further step needed to overcome "denaturalization". On the contrary, denaturalizing critiques need to be extended and promoted as they seek to articulate equal conditions of political agency *with* ecological demands. Their articulation avoids an abstract concept of nature (or life) which would maintain existing dominations, or activate authoritarian views. But denaturalizing critiques are not just *negative*, in the sense of destructive; rather, in maintaining a gap, in keeping open the grounds on which normative sources are selected to articulate political demands, they allow us to understand how we lost the sense of interdependency with other human and non-human lives, and with ecosystems, for the profit. Just as we need to recognize the ecological conditions of human history, we need to historicise our discourses on nature. As we cannot extract from our place and time, our responsibility is therefore to accompany our ethical and political reflections with a critical moment on the realities folded into the terms we use.

It is my view, therefore, that tackling the ecological crisis is inseparable from reinvesting subjective possibilities of inhabitance and guaranteeing equal conditions of political agency. Only then can subjects organise more sustainably. D'Eaubonne declares at the end of her essay *Ecology/feminism*:

> The separation is an anti-life [La separation est une anti-vie]; it is therefore counter-revolutionary, and even more, countermutational. Autonomy, let's repeat it once again, is not separation ; on the contrary, it is the foundation of encounters.

While autonomy is equated with self-sufficiency within liberal-humanistic frames, D'Eaubonne demonstrates that autonomy relies on the recognition of the interdependency of all living organisms and their habitat. Autonomy is impeded by the separations (plural) that ground the self-proclaimed "separation from nature". Separations, maintained by mechanisms of domination, undermine the possibility of encounters, thus foreclosing possibilities of equal inhabitance. If denaturalizing critiques attempt to uncover the mechanisms at the root of separations, political projects articulated to these denaturalizing critiques also aim to recenter autonomy as interdependence.

A common project of emancipation, articulating the search for ecological balance, necessitates the political agency of subjects that are still denied it – and maybe, even a reinvention of subjectivity altogether. In the contemporary political conjuncture, marked by the rise of fascist tendencies and authoritarian governments, d'Eaubonne's idea of a transnational feminist alliance is, after all, not a bad idea, provided that it remains alimented by a politics of non-identity, opened to a continuous redefinition of ideas of autonomy and equality.

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