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INTERVIEW



## “Never Waste a Good Crisis”: An Interview with Mary Mellor

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Dr. Mary Mellor, Professor Emeritus of Sociology at the University of Northumbria in the United Kingdom, has published numerous articles and books on feminism, politics, sustainability, and economics, including *Worker Cooperatives in Theory and Practice* (co-authored 1988), *Breaking the Boundaries: Towards a Feminist Green Socialism* (1992), *Feminism and Ecology* (1997), *The Politics of Money* (co-authored 2002), *The Future of Money* (2010), and *Debt or Democracy* (2015). Her activism has included participation in the anti-nuclear women’s camp at Greenham Common, lecturing internationally on women, environment and peace, and co-founding the Sustainable Cities Research Institute and the World Economics Association.

Only once in a great while do we read a book that saliently articulates how to consider what needs to be done. Mellor’s (1997) *Feminism and Ecology* is just such a book. In its aim to explore the dialectical and historical relationship between feminism and ecology, and identify its radical potential, the text serves a dual purpose – it inclusively surveys three fields of socio-political history and critical thought (the untitled third being Marxism) in conversation with one another, while embarking on an ambitious argument of its own. Writing against theories that “start from the false premise that human actors are disembodied and disembedded,” Mellor posits an ecofeminism that

brings together the analysis of the ecological consequences of human ‘progress’ from the Green movement, and the feminist critique of women’s disproportionate responsibility for the costs and consequences of human embodiment, to show how relations of inequality within the human community are reflected in destructive relations between humanity and the non-human world (1997, viii).

The critical crux of this argument is the historical materiality, the embodiment and embeddedness of human existence as the basis for an ecofeminist immanent realism, an epistemology for a politics of nature:

The debate on objectivity and science is very much focused around the problems of subjectivity as against objectivity. For ecofeminists, the more critical question is the human subjectivity/objectivity in relation to the subjectivity of nature as an object. If humanity is part of an immanent reality, an interconnected whole, then, while epistemological questions are vital for humanity, they do not affect the dynamics of the whole. There is a “truth” about those relations that is at present beyond hu(man) grasp (122).

Mellor’s current work on money is equally ambitious. Books like *Debt or Democracy*, as well as her new project, *The Magic of Money*, grow out of the same principle of radical politics that informs her theoretical work as an ecofeminist – challenge power where it lives. Speak truth to what bell hooks calls “white-supremacist capitalist patriarchy.” Never waste a crisis; it contains great potential for the public good. A good lesson for us all. I interviewed Mellor at her home in Newcastle in February 2017.

**HF:** You’ve been writing about materialism for a long time, since the 1990s. What do you make of the new-materialist turn in theory?

**MM:** I’m delighted to hear of it. I’ve been so absorbed with the money issue that I’ve drifted into heterodox economics and away from that kind of theory.

I’ve wondered why I was getting asked to give more talks on ecofeminism after many, many years of writing on money and not hearing much about it. Suddenly, people started getting in touch with me about gender and economy. I’ve just written a chapter on ecofeminist political economy for an anthology being put together by Routledge on nature, and there’s another book on the economics of care coming out for which I’ve written on money and the economics of care. So, all this work is coming together.

I am writing yet another book on money, as a sociologist, which I am, but I’ve been described as an economist. I think these boundaries are silly anyway.

**HF:** They are. This “materialist turn” reflects the convergence of a few different fields: science studies, critical theory, feminist theory, ecocriticism and/or environmental thought. In the last five to seven years there’s been an explosion of books with the word Anthropocene in the title in literary studies, theory, sociology, economics... It’s all over the place. Feminists have both endorsed and opposed the term, for various obvious reasons. What do you think about that term?

**MM:** The phrase that I used a long time ago for the human influence on the environment [as part of the environment] is “immanence.”

**HF:** I like the term “immanent realism.”

**MM:** Immanent realism. I should have said critical immanent realism, but I think critical was implied. Realism is an important word there because

there are structures, frameworks of embeddedness in the environment and the body, which you might be able to change but not *fundamentally* alter.

**HF:** Right! In other words, we are human beings.

**MM:** Yes, that's right, and immanence means that we are within that framework. We can't transcend it; we can't get beyond it; we have no God's eye view.

**HF:** We are animals.

**MM:** We're animals, that's right. But the term Anthropocene, to me, suggests that the interaction of humans with nature isn't human to nature, it's human to human to nature. We structure our relationship with nature not as individuals, but as a species, through social relationships, political and economic relationships.

**HF:** Yes, in that sense what you're saying overlaps with what Clark (2015) argues in *The Anthropocene Disorder*, namely that we're so different from other animals that as a species we have a leviathan-like impact on our environment.

**MM:** We alter it to an unusual degree, absolutely. I'm sure the dinosaurs altered their environment. After all, bacteria alter the environment as well. Each evolutionary change alters its environment, but nothing and no one can transcend the environment. And none of us can predict what changes in the environment will produce.

My position at the end of *Feminism and Ecology* was that because we live inside the world, we live in uncertainty. But this doesn't mean that we are powerless in this ecological situation. Quite the reverse. And, because we're part of the immanent world, not dealing with it will have as big an impact on it as dealing with it.

So, back to the importance of critical realism. While we can't predict or control the world, we're stuck with it. Therefore, we should try continually to critically analyze it, to try to do better. This is why I work with concepts like sufficiency and provisioning, and have been quite involved with the degrowth movement (not that degrowth is without problems) – to [look into ways of living] as sustainably as we can.

More purely theoretical work can be less critical, in the sense that nothing comes out of it. My earlier cultural sociology only deconstructed.

**HF:** Yes, purely theoretical work can be less critical. However, it seems to me that your earlier work set up a framework for what you called a radical ontology, a grounding awareness as the basis for praxis.

**MM:** That's what I was hoping for.

**HF:** Speaking of praxis or, indeed, even the practical, what do you think about environmentalism that is wedded to the idea of technological fixes to climate change, to geomorphing?

**MM:** Putting mirrors in space, this kind of thing? I have no patience with it at all. I never did. I never did the separate planet stuff and techno-fixes. I don't reject technology. I'm not a Luddite or a subsistence person.

I looked into the idea of subsistence, of going back to very simple ways of life and, to be honest, it is too hard on women. I'm not a technophobe but I would put technology through the same critical filter as I do everything else: How useful is it? How sustainable? How democratic?

I've been on degrowth platforms with people like Serge Latouche. For some, the idea goes back to André Gorz. They talk about not doing paid work, going back to working for oneself and this type of thing. They assume it's a kind of leisure and choice. Well, a woman's life isn't like that.

**HF:** Not most women's lives.

**MM:** Not most women. The under-laboring done by technology (washing machines and vacuum cleaners etc.) uses a lot of energy. If you put sustainability at the top of the [priority] scale, and you do away with all of those things, who's going to do the hand washing?

**HF:** Women! This is a real problem, but feminists who are working on women's rights globally sometimes see technology as a purely positive thing for this reason. But if the whole world lived the way England or America or Japan does, we'd be in huge trouble. We're already in huge trouble.

**MM:** Yes, that's right. If we want to go to minimal usage, the men are going to have to – for a start – help do the washing on a Monday, in the cold water, rubbing the stones. You don't get any sense that they think that's what they'll be doing. They think they'll be playing the guitar and taking long contemplative walks.

**HF:** Riding a bike to work instead of driving a car.

**MM:** Yeah, that kind of thing. My feeling about technology is that we don't just reject it. We judge it case by case. For example, [one can't talk about technology without talking about] the World Wide Web. People say it is a wonderful thing, a real radicalization [of social relations.] Everybody sits with their bloody Macs, or their little Apple things in front of them, talking about sustainability. And I tell them off: "How much money have you spent on these Macs? What about the disposal of these Macs? What about the energy? What about the servers to drive these Macs you're all sitting there behind?"

**HF:** It's been estimated something like a tenth of the world's power usage is now information technology.

**MM:** Bitcoin is meant to be this wonderful freeing thing. It's a load of old nonsense; think of the power it takes to drive, to replicate, all those transactions globally. I just think it's crazy, on energy usage alone.

**HF:** We ought to adopt a policy of technology skepticism anyway, given it is driven by capitalism. A healthy, ecologically-grounded skepticism could make a big difference.

In your turn toward more praxis-orientated work, what is the role of the critique of ideology in your writing on money?

**MM:** The whole theory of money as economics is ideological. It's totally flawed – flawed empirically. My view [of critique is that it] is situational, tied to observable phenomena. Critique is not universal. It's not absolute. It requires an evolving concept of truth, really. It is a straining for truth one can never wholly grasp because one can never be entirely sure of an entire situation, the parameters etc.

**HF:** Ideological critique, then, requires a radically skeptical view of truth.

**MM:** Radically skeptical, but not one that abandons truth.

**HF:** Yes, because politics requires a concept of truth.

**MM:** Yes, it does.

The heart of my analysis of money is the idea of public sector money. Everybody now accepts the idea that banks create money. That critique has been accepted. What hasn't been accepted, not even by the monetary reformers or the modern monetary theorists is that the State continually creates money as well.

Every time the bank [gives out] a loan, it is creating new money, and every time it takes the payments back in, it's cancelling the loan book, as it were. So, it's a continual process of lending out always new money, while the loan book shrinks every time somebody makes a repayment. You don't think about it as individual loans and repayments. You think of it as a loan book.

I think it's exactly the same for the State. When they plan their budgets and make their expenditures and credit people's accounts, they don't know what the tax take is going to be. If they took the tax in first, they would have a pot of money to draw on it until it ran out. But that's not how it works. If it did, you wouldn't get a deficit.

But look at it this way: if every time the State makes expenditures it is effectively creating the thing which I call public money, money spent by

the State, then every time it takes a tax payment, it shrinks [the amount of] that public money. It's looking the other way round. The assumption is that we tax the productive sector to pay for the public sector, and I think that [view is a] complete misunderstanding what's happening.

There are two sources of money circulation: the banking one and the public one. If the banks didn't lend any money there wouldn't be any money, and if the States didn't spend any money there wouldn't be any money, because nobody else has the right to create it.

Once you look at it like that, this rhetoric about the tax payer's money, "We're running an overdraft, running a deficit" is all ideological nonsense. Austerity is ideological nonsense. It's all based on an assumption that somehow the money is created somewhere, finds its way to the tax payer's pocket, and the State takes it out of the tax payer's pocket and wastes it.

What I've come to in my analysis of money is a theoretical defense of not only the existence and nature of the welfare state, but the necessity of the welfare state. The banks always want more money than they lend out – they want it back with interest. The only alternative origin for that money to pay the interest is a State "deficit." That's the only way you can get new money (money that hasn't been spent before). The argument in my most recent book is that the commercial sector actually feeds off the public sector.

**HF:** Sometimes very directly, subsidizing new technology, for instance.

**MM:** When it comes to the question you asked originally about ideology, I challenge the neoliberal framework without going over to a Marxist position of, say, the necessity of owning the means of production – not that I would object to that. I'm just more interested in the way in which an analysis of the monetary system makes the case for the necessity of a public economy.

**HF:** What do you think it means to be a radical now, in these dark times?

**MM:** Even to be an old-fashioned social democrat is radical at the moment. What worries me is that we live in very radical times that the left and center do not understand.

**HF:** Times with an increased potential for really radical action, wouldn't you agree?

**MM:** Brexit and the rise of Le Pen and Trump, [all of which constitutes] piggy-backing on massive amounts of discontent, the complete failure of neo-liberalism and globalization.

The left has been caught off guard because it swallowed the neoliberal story that all wealth comes from the productive sector and trade. This story has now

let everybody down, or at least let substantial sections of the population down, and we have no alternative stories, no alternative analyses, no alternative proposals.

But I do have a set of proposals that could be used as much by the right as by the left. My argument has always been that the right has no compunction about public expenditure.

**HF:** No, certainly not when it comes to military spending.

**MM:** The point is that if the left and center don't understand how the money system works and don't advocate getting control of it – conscious control of it – and democratizing and taking ownership of this mechanism, the right will do it automatically. The nationalists and demagogues and tyrants, it's the first thing they do.

**HF:** Given this, do you think the current so-called populism signals the rise of fascism?

**MM:** I see it very much along these lines. This kind of populism, the hatred of the stranger, is the politics that will always fill the vacuum.

We now have a vacuum of thought. I think feminist economics isn't picking up on the money stuff, and radical economics, heterodox economics, isn't picking up on the ecofeminism. My work falls into a great chasm.

**HF:** The problem you're dealing with is interdisciplinary and multidisciplinary. It is easy to fall into a gap between disciplines, and yet it's that space from which radical critique actually emerges.

You were saying a moment ago that there's genuine anger fueling the current "populism." When people outside the U.S. ask me to explain the rise of Trump, I go back to the 1930s and what used to be called "idiot socialism." The phrase refers to real anger about the injustices of capitalism that, instead of drawing on or developing a critique of capitalism, manifested as anti-Semitism.

**MM:** I think, in a way, Trump got the message. He understood. Fascism is often expressed as National Socialism for very good reasons. It's not a Republicanism, it's not a small government.

**HF:** Yes, he makes protectionist noise about the U.S. economy.

**MM:** He perceives the pain of the many left behind by capitalism in America, but he's bonkers. He's a loose cannon and he's dangerous.

**HF:** America has got a strong anti-intellectual streak, always has.

**MM:** He resonates with that as well.



**HF:** Yes. He's not well-spoken and doesn't value education. He taps into the American distrust of intellectuals, which dovetails with fear of immigrants, anti-Semitism etc.

**MM:** I don't remember Hillary Clinton's campaign in detail because it was always Trump you heard about. People say she gave speeches on economics, but I didn't hear any.

**HF:** It was only when Bernie Sanders became a real contender that she began addressing this discontent.

**MM:** Too little, too late. And she's a warmonger as well.

**HF:** Ideologically, they're not too different, Bill and Hillary.

**MM:** Bill Clinton pushed deregulation, opened Pandora's Box, really.

**HF:** For the 2008 crisis?

**MM:** Yes, they planted the seeds of that crisis by repealing the Glass-Steagall Act.

**HF:** And Trump rallied not only real anger about capitalism, but misogyny as well.

**MM:** The male pronoun has come back in, hasn't it? Even women politicians use male pronouns. It's always he, the tax payer. People aren't careful about language anymore. The trouble for feminism is that it became about equal opportunities for neoliberalism.

A lot of women got left behind. I think it was Robert Chambers, the developmental sociologist, who said, "Put the last first." All your politics, all your development work should always come from putting the last first. Equal opportunity feminism wasn't about putting the last first.

Who is the last person? Chambers said in development work people always went to talk to the people who could actually speak English, or spoke to the head of some place out of politeness to the community. They stayed on the dry roads. They didn't go into the marshy land where the poorest people lived. It's very hard to put the last first because you are insulting the framework of power.

Positive change is [never] on safe ground. As soon as the going gets tough, then the "softer" policies are dropped. We thought [basic feminism] was on safe ground, and it's just not.

I became interested in money because ecofeminism led me to ecofeminist political economy. I was interested in unpaid labor and externalized nature. Why do some have so much more than others? What is money anyway? Who pays? The phrase that resonated with me from the 1980s, before I

published *Feminism and Ecology*, because I was at the Greenham Common Women's Peace Camp. That's where I picked up on ecofeminism. Up until then I had been a solid Marxist – labor politics but Marxists analysis. Then the Cruise missiles came in 1981. They were put in an American army base at Greenham Common. There was a march on the base, with men, but afterwards a vote was taken and the men were asked to leave the camp. The Peace Camp thought the army would be more violent if there were men on their side; they thought they'd have more "soft power," as it were, if it was a women's camp.

I went and visited and came across a big statue of the goddess with an offering. That was the first wave of ecofeminism.

**HF:** It was very essentialist.

**MM:** Very essentialist, and I thought, "What's going on here?" Then I got hold of Ruether's (1975) book, *New Woman New Earth*, and thought, "This makes more sense." Suddenly bringing together ecology and feminism seemed both sensible and more radical. With the Tory regime of the 1980s, every time you wanted "radical" things, like milk for school children, they said, "Where's the money to come from?" So, that's the question I kept coming back to.

Once you open the question, money becomes fascinating. When I wrote *The Future of Money*, it was just after the crisis. The book went to press in 2009, and I didn't publicize it a lot myself. Anyway, it did reasonably well. The next one, *Debt or Democracy*, I sent to well-known people. I won't name names but there was a quite famous Marxist economist who's done a lot of excellent work popularizing economics who replied, "Money's not my thing." And I thought, here's someone who writes popular books but just said, "Money's not my thing."

**HF:** I recently interviewed Kim Stanley Robinson (Feder 2017) about his new science fiction novel, *New York 2140* (Robinson 2017), in which he tries to imagine how one would get from late capitalism to an equitable economic framework. His answer is a universal default on debt. There's no payment or repayment, the financial system collapses, and real value is tied to householders' unions.

**MM:** It sounds like going from a money system to a non-money system of household production, local production, regional production, nesting systems. I don't think that's feasible, but I certainly think that if you cancelled all debts tomorrow, you could crash the present money system. You can't base money on debt. That's not sustainable socially, economically, or ecologically. But you'd have to be very quick to issue new money, otherwise people couldn't exchange any more. People

can't shift to a subsistence exchange. It never existed. Barter exchange never existed. Even pre-industrial communities had money.

**HF:** Issued by those in power?

**MM:** No, just a mechanism of measurement. Knives, or horses. It was mainly used not for trade but for dowries, tributes, and injury payments. Graeber's (2014) *Debt: The First 5000 Years* points out that a lot of the older money systems were injury payments.

**HF:** We've been talking about ecological crises and economic crises. Let's say there is another, parallel crisis at the moment, a crisis of *truth*. You said earlier that critique is a struggle toward truth. As with the ecological crisis, have we run up against some systemic limit of thought, or lack of thought?

**MM:** I've been giving lots of talks titled "Never Waste a Good Crisis." We are wasting this ecological and financial crisis, and that opens up dark forces, because they will step into the vacuum, as I said before. We can't stop the crisis. The point about a crisis is that it's a crisis. Once you're in it you've got to capture its radical potential as fast as possible. My concern is the center left isn't doing it.

**HF:** What should we be doing?

**MM:** Educating ourselves and educating others.

**HF:** That's a good Marxist answer.

**MM:** We've got to imagine alternatives. We can do something different. If I'm going to be blunt, I'd like everybody to read my book, *Debt or Democracy: Public Money for Sustainability and Social Justice*.

**HF:** That's a good suggestion. Thank you for the interview.

## Disclosure statement

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