

Interview with Carolyn Merchant
For the Center for Advanced Study in the Behavioral Sciences,
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1. *The Death of Nature: Women, Ecology, and the Scientific Revolution* recently celebrated its 40th anniversary. Could you ever have imagined it would have such enduring influence? To what do you attribute the impact that it has had?

The book was published in 1980 and was extremely timely. It was the outcome and synthesis of the movements of the 1960s and '70s and of the books I read during that time. And it spoke to the experiences of many people coming of age in those two decades.

Movements

The book was the outcome of three major movements that had begun in the 1960s and continuing into the 1980s in which many people who read the book participated. The women's movement that began with Betty Freidan's *Feminine Mystique* (1963) built on Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* (1949). The main book that influenced me was Betty Friedan's *Feminine Mystique* (1963) which I read when I was a graduate student at the University of Wisconsin. It made me and others realize that I could be more than "just a housewife" as Glenna Matthews wrote in 1987. Women's movement 1962. A multitude of other books on women and the women's movement were published in the 1970s. Eg. Susan Griffin, *Woman and Nature*, 1978. Shulamith Firestone, *Dialectic of Sex*, 1970; and *Sisterhood is Powerful*, on writings from the Women's Liberation Movement, ed. Robin Morgan, 1970. Chapter 1 on Nature as Female, Chapter 5 on Women and Witches, Chapter 6 on Production, Reproduction, and the Female, and 11 on Women on Nature, as well as other sections of the book were influenced by the women's movement.

The environmental movement that began with Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* 1962, which I read right after it came out, and which set off environmental consciousness on the impact of DDT on the ecology of nature. My own experience began on my first date with my ex-husband. He took me out to view one of Wisconsin's remaining native prairies. As he showed me the plants, he took a match out of his pocket and lit fire to the dried grasses. We then drove around and watch the prairie burn. The following spring it was a mass of newly rejuvenated prairie flowers. Another book that influenced me was Paul Ehrlich's *The Population Bomb* (1967) that showed how an increasingly expanding world population was diminishing the natural resources that humans needed to survive. I was also influenced by other books on the environment such as Wendell Berry's *Unsettling of America* (1977), Aldo Leopold's *Sand County Almanac*, 1949; Mary Austin's *Land of Little Rain* 1903 reprinted in 1950. Chapter 2 on Farm, Fen, and Forest and Chapter 4, *The World an Organism* were especially influenced by the environmental movement.

The third movement was the movement for social change that grew out of the antiwar movement of the late 1960s and 1970s. Protests over the US bombing of North Vietnam and young men being drafted to serve in the US troops that being sent to South Vietnam. Protests were started by peace activists and groups such as the Students for a Democratic Society. Many thought young people were being sent to Asia to fight in what they

thought was an illegal war. The antiwar movement spread to challenges to global capitalism and its impact on natural resources. One part of this movement was the *back to the land movement*. People wanted to live on the land and support themselves. There was a lot of interest in utopias and alternatives to capitalism. I myself taught at Oregon State University in Corvallis in 1969. I lived on a farm. I raised 7 horses and milked a goat on a goat milking stand that I built myself. A female student who had been the runner-up Dairy Queen of the State of Oregon and who was getting a degree in veterinary medicine lived there with me and took care of my kids while taught 2 classes on the History of Science. She taught my how to raise animals and plant crops. Chapter 3 on Organic Society and Utopia was especially influenced by these ideas and activities.

2. Your new book is *The Anthropocene & the Humanities: From Climate Change to a New Age of Sustainability*. What do you want people to take away from this new work? Is this book the logical place where your career was pointing you, or is it the result of some unexpected turn that your research took you in recent years?

The Anthropocene and the Humanities (2020) was in many ways a continuation of The Death of Nature due to the Anthropocene. The Death of Nature concluded in **the early eighteenth century**. The Anthropocene meaning the Age of Man or Humankind in the view of Paul Crutzen and Eugene Stoermer (who introduced the term in their paper of the year 2000) began with the invention of the steam engine by James Watt in the **late eighteenth century** (1784) which made the burning of fossil fuels in steam engines possible. The introduction of greenhouse gases into the atmosphere in particular carbon dioxide (CO₂) and methane (CH₄) that resulted brought about increases in the temperature of the atmosphere and hence human induced global warming. If greenhouse gases continue to increase a new death of nature may occur as melting ice and sea levels rise. Some have called the resulting age the Capitalocene. That **new death of nature** may include the human species and much of the biological world as it exists today.

What we need to take away is that we need a new relationship between humans and the earth that will lead to a new era of sustainability in which resources are conserved, ecosystems are restored, and a new ethic of partnership between humans and the earth is adopted.

The Death of Nature needs to be recreated in a new worldview based on an ecological consciousness. Humans need to see themselves as part of the web of nature and partners with the natural world. If we can do this we can exit the age of the Anthropocene and the mechanistic model of nature and enter a new **Era of Sustainability** based on an **ethic of partnership**.

I sum up this new age of partnership and sustainability with the following mantra:

Solar panels on every roof
 Bicycles in every garage
 and
 Vegetables in every back yard.

“Politics, ethics, and individual actions can restore, reclaim, and reinvigorate the earth.”

3. Are there any big unanswered questions related to things you've researched in your career? Or, are there big questions in your field that have remained unasked, in your opinion?

The big unanswered questions pertain to how we as humans are going to **conserve, maintain, and restore** the planet. How are we going to save the animals and plants around us that are in danger of extinction. How are we going to keep the planet from warming and becoming uninhabitable. How are we going to adapt to a new ethic of the use of nature and the love of nature that will continue into future centuries. Otherwise we are in danger of making the planet uninhabitable by the end of the century.

We need to start teaching young children a new ethic as they enter first grade and how to implement it as they grow older.

4. Is there anything you want to be asked about?

The 3 words in the subtitle of The Death of Nature: Women, Ecology, and the Scientific Revolution are today still manifestations of the title. But all have changed and evolved.

Women have gained more power and have the possibilities of positions, professorships, and executives. But still have a long way to go to achieve equality.

Ecology is still ever present and is now a daily concern, but is more problematic. More people understand the ecological consequences of human actions on the planet. Climate change, species extinctions, ocean and atmospheric pollution, pesticides in the food chain are just a few. The planet itself is in crisis and is perhaps approaching a second death of nature.

The Scientific Revolution has evolved from what it was in the seventeenth century with the work of Copernicus, Kepler, Bacon, Descartes, Boyle, and Newton--to mention just a few names—to a new world based on computers and a digital world composed of ones and zeros.

They nevertheless all describe and pertain to the world we are living in today.