by Jill Moffett

What does promoting the sterilization of poor women addicted to drugs have in common with the reaction of environmental activists to whaling by the Makau Indians? To many people these actions seem uncontroversial: after all, most people support efforts to prevent fetal exposure to drugs and agree that endangered species should be protected. But both are premised on an adversarial mode of thought which is deeply embedded in U.S. culture and difficult to move beyond. Feminists have written critically about the idea of maternal-fetal conflict, cautioning that this dichotomy gives credence to restrictive policies which limit a pregnant woman’s autonomy. And although protecting wilderness and wildlife are certainly noble goals, the assumptions and understandings that underlie many conservation efforts are similar to those that foster notions of a confrontational relationship between mother and fetus.

Maternal-fetal conflict describes the ways that law, social policies and medical practices sometimes treat a pregnant woman’s interests in opposition to those of the fetus. This dichotomy creates a justification for restricting the autonomy of the pregnant woman. Dorothy Roberts recounts a former slave’s description of the beating of pregnant slave women who did “somethin’ de white folks didn’t like. Dey [the white folks] would dig a hole in de ground just big ‘nuff fo’ her stomach, make her lie face down an’ whip her on de back to keep from hurtin’ de child.”

The 1993 Supreme court ruling, Bray v. Alexandria Women’s Health Clinic, provides another salient example of maternal-fetal conflict. The plaintiff asked the court to decide whether anti-abortion demonstrations at the clinic deliberately deprive women seeking abortions and medical services of their “constitutionally protected right to interstate travel by making the destination of that travel inaccessible.” The court ruled that it did not, and Judge Scalia wrote that “Whatever one thinks of abortion, there are common and respectable reasons for opposing it other than hatred of or condescension toward (or indeed any view at all concerning) women as a class.” Valerie Hartouni rightly points out the fallacy of this argument. Since only women can get pregnant, the desire to stop abortions must have something to do with women.
Other examples of maternal-fetal conflict include the claim by some obstetricians that the fetus is actually the primary obstetrics patient;vi the societal monitoring of pregnant women who drink alcohol, smoke cigarettes or even drink coffee; charging women with criminal offenses after they have given birth to babies who test positive for drugs;vii and the recent proposal by the Bush administration to allow states to classify the fetus as an “unborn child” eligible for government-paid health care (rather than making adequate health care available for all pregnant women).viii

At the heart of maternal-fetal conflict is an “attempt to protect fetuses by denying the humanity of the mother.”ix But denying the humanity of the mother will never result in true protection of children, since the fates of mother and child are inextricably intertwined. In Martha Nussbaum’s discussion of the “capabilities approach” to development, she notes that “capabilities... should be pursued for each and every person, treating each as an end and none as a mere tool for the ends of others.” She goes on to remark that “Women have all too often been treated as the supporters of the ends of others, rather than as ends in their own right.”x Imposing restrictive policies on a pregnant woman does not treat her as an end in herself (since she is perceived as only a vessel for the fetus), and this action can have negative consequences for the child. For example, in the case of pregnant women testing positive for drugs, removing the child from her mother (or worse, jailing the mother) certainly have a damaging rather than a positive effect on the child. A policy that did not employ ideas of maternal-fetal conflict would be inclined to provide treatment and other services for the mother so that she could provide her child with adequate care. It is also important to note that in a society built on a racial and class hierarchy, it is poor women and women of color whose rights are most often violated in maternal-fetal conflict since they are the most vulnerable.

If the maternal fetal conflict invokes an opposition between mother and fetus, the conservation approach to environmentalism often does the same between people and the environment. The rights and “capabilities” of the same types of people (poor, non-white) are the ones which are most often disregarded as a result. Conservationists aim to protect species and wilderness from destruction, not in itself a bad thing. But often conservationist thought is fueled by an idea of inherent people-environment conflict which can lead to policies and projects that are problematic.

The people-environment conflict is dangerous for several reasons. First, it makes invisible the realities that not all cultures or groups of people abuse the earth as a matter of course. For example, some of the most fertile land in Brazil, known locally as terra preta do índio (Indian dark earth), is enriched by broken ceramics left by people who sustained large settlements on the land for an estimated two millenia,xi proof that civilizations need not necessarily degrade the environment.

Secondly, this mode of thought can be used to dehumanize entire populations rather than looking at structural inequities. For example, white middle-class neighborhoods where families recycle their garbage and buy expensive organic vegetables could be perceived as more evolved or environmentally aware than populations in poor neighborhoods, where garbage pick-up is less regular, and grocery stores do not sell healthful food.

Thirdly, the people-environment conflict obscures the reality that the responsibility for the bulk of the damage done to the earth lies with specific powerful actors (militaries, governments and multinationals) rather than an “undifferentiated humanity.”xii For example, militaries are major environmental abusers. They generate huge amounts of toxic waste, use enormous amounts of oil, producing six to ten percent of global air pollution, and consume vast amounts of ozone depleting substances, not to mention the havoc they wreak on the environment through bombing and scorched earth strategies. Yet we rarely read about these causes of ecological degradation when journalists address the state of the environment.

The controversy around whaling by the Makah Indians in
Washington is a good example of the potency of the people-environment conflict. The Makah killed one whale in 1999 after receiving permission from the International Whaling Commission to do so. Reaction by environmentalists to this hunt was passionate: newspapers compared Indian whale-hunting to female genital mutilation\textsuperscript{xiii} and many environmentalist groups decried the tribe’s return to whaling because the “contemporary version of a Makah hunt is far from traditional” (the hunters used guns as well as spears) and because the Makah had not shown a “nutritional and cultural need for eating whale meat.”\textsuperscript{xiv} Outrage over the Makah whale hunt rapidly degenerated into racist name-calling, with some animal rights activists calling the Makah the “savages that threw the harpoon.”\textsuperscript{xv} Yet the Makah had been planning the hunt for many years, after an archeological dig had revealed thousands of artifacts that proved the tribe had a long history of whaling. Tribal elders felt that the whale hunt would bring the tribe together, and had the potential to restore pride and discipline in its young people. In this case, the idea that people are always in conflict with the environment stifled understanding of the action. The environmentalists made no allowance for the fact that the Makah do not have the same relationship to the earth or to whales as the dominant American culture. Because the idea of people-environment conflict is a foundation of U.S. environmentalist thought, a longstanding alliance between Native peoples and environmentalists was shattered.

Another example of the limitations imposed by the people-environment conflict approach is the development of Amboseli National Park in Kenya. This wildlife preserve was set aside as protected land, a move which forced the Masai people and their cattle, which fended off scrub growth and sustained the Serengeti grassland, off of their land.\textsuperscript{xvi} The Masai practiced “rational grazing” which made use of high-potential and marginal lands. This practice ensured year-round availability of pasture, water, and salt licks — thus avoiding losses brought on by occasional drought. This type of interaction with the environment sustained the Masai population without causing environmental degradation.\textsuperscript{xvii} Displacing a native population in order to conserve wilderness is clearly counter-productive. Once again, this effort was conceived of and carried out with the implicit belief that people are always in conflict with the natural world, a belief that was not necessarily true in this situation.

Wilderness preservation and wildlife conservation in the United States are often perceived as safe, uncontroversial causes. Yet it is important to note that awareness of environmental issues is not always motivated by altruism. For example, Nazi environmentalism viewed the German people as part of the environment, and Jews and other ‘undesirables’ as the polluters of the German land. Similar views are held by some right-wing anti-immigration groups in the U.S. who believe that immigrants are destroying our pristine (native) landscape.\textsuperscript{xviii} Conceiving of people as inherently in conflict with the land reinforces simplistic Malthusian ideas of “carrying capacity” (the idea that the earth can support a finite number of people, and that rapid population growth is the primary cause of environmental degradation), and cements already popular ideas of the Earth being overrun by the teeming masses of the Third World, since conservation efforts are rarely concerned with reducing consumption in the United States, and are often focused on protecting endangered species in Southern countries.

The parallels between maternal-fetal conflict and people-environment conflict are telling. Just as issues concerning “the fetus” cannot be considered separately from the concerns of women, “environmental issues do not present themselves to us in well-defined boxes labeled radiation, national park, pandas, coral reefs, rainforest, heavy metal pollution, and the like. Instead, they are interconnected in all kinds of ways.”\textsuperscript{xix} The critiques of maternal-fetal conflict lodged by feminists are useful when examining and analyzing environmental and conservation policies. By resisting the temptation to create false dichotomies, environmentalists can better imagine creative and holistic approaches to persistent environmental problems.
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References
vi Valerie Hartouni, Cultural Conceptions (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 2.
v Ibid.
viii Tim Jones and Frank James, “White House proposes classifying fetus as a child,” Chicago Tribune, February 1, 2002.
x Ibid., 149.
xiii Wendy-Anne Thompson, “That Was One Expensive Meal,” Alberta Report 26, no. 25 (June 13, 1999).
xv Thompson, “That Was One Expensive Meal,” quoting Judith Stone, president of the Animal Advocates Society of B.C.