

## **Lessons from an Idiosyncratic Greek Eco-Feminist Experiment.**

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### **Abstract**

It is often argued that the renewal of democracy presupposes female emancipation and the essential participation of women in decision making centers. This is associated with different ways of defining gender identities in contemporary social and political establishments. In this line, the research on the encounter between new social movements and state institutions is invaluable. In Greece from 1989 until 1993, a Green political party endorsed alternative politics and corresponding social changes through its proclamations for direct democracy, many referenda and decision making based on broad consensus. Their delegates and representatives could be recalled for failing to carry out the decisions made at the grassroots level and all officials with delegated powers were rotated frequently (every year) to avoid professionalisation of politics. 'Ecologists-Alternatives' and their parliamentary representatives supported the principles of direct, grassroots democracy but their political discourse and practices quite often exhibited theoretical breaches and ideological disparities. The failure of their enterprise to have a lasting effect on the contemporary Greek political system is worth studying since it sheds light on the weaknesses of this approach and the links between the development of social movements in Greece after the mid-1970s and the democratic processes. It is suggested that whenever social movements which advocate direct democracy develop into established political parties and participate in electoral processes of the representative democracy they end up being absorbed by the state mechanism and they eventually lose their dynamic and their radical democratic worldview.

### **Lessons from an idiosyncratic Greek eco-feminist experiment**

From 1989 to 1993 (after two consecutive elections in November 1989 and April 1990) a small Greek political party, the *Ecologists-Alternatives (EA)-Federation of Ecological and Alternative Organisations*, which was promoted as the coalition of ecologists and feminists, favoured by a short interval of a nearly proportional electoral system and boosted by its motto: 'New politics is a woman', won a parliamentary seat and was represented in the Greek parliament exclusively by women MPs based on an annual rotation scheme. The party during its electoral campaigns had declared its origins in the new social movements and had advocated alternative politics and support for social transformations in favour of gender equality and a renewed place for women in politics. Through their declarations for more direct forms of democracy via numerous referenda the EA sought to engulf the principles of radical democracy<sup>1</sup> which were largely the concern of many feminists. The case is distinct in the Greek political scene and it is worth studying since it sheds light on certain issues related to the history of social movements in Greece in the post-dictatorship era (after 1974).

Attempts for the creation of an alternative, ecological political entity in Greece started in the early 1980s with great discord since various ecologists displayed an ‘allergy’ to structured political entities due to their anarchist past. But after the accident at the nuclear plant of Chernobyl and increased citizens’ concern about environmental crises, major ecological organisations in the country, felt obliged to respond. This led to the creation of a loose FEAO (*Federation of Ecological and Alternative Organisations*) in 1988, the first electoral test for which came at the 1989 elections for the European parliament in which a faction of the Federation under the name EA (*Ecologists-Alternatives*) earned 1.12% of the popular vote and 1 MEP. The euphoria that followed this success led eventually to the creation of a political party, the EA-FEAO on October 1, 1989<sup>2</sup>, just a month before the national elections of November, initially by 46 groups. Its founding meeting dealt with organizational and administrative concerns, its aims and targets as well as with the forthcoming elections. The majority of the present members of the Federation voted in favour of the party’s participation in the elections<sup>3</sup>. In fact, given the timing of its constitution one can argue that it was chiefly founded in order to participate in the November 1989 national elections.

The attraction that EA members felt for ‘the charm of the ballot’ is regarded as the result of encouraging messages that the electoral victories of the ‘Green’ parties had sent throughout western Europe. The representatives of the Federation suggested that their party was not (and would never become) personality-based, that they wished to introduce new elements to the Greek political scene (such as the annual rotation of their delegates), that they are only based on their members’ financial support and that they value the principles of the grass-root ecology groups that were formed in Greece after the fall of the military junta in 1974. They claimed that their voters had diverse political affiliations but prioritized ecological concerns. Above and beyond all, they emphasized that they were not and never intended to be ‘professional politicians’<sup>4</sup>.

It is equally true that together with the prominence of ecology, the Federation from its very onset made quite clear that it also aimed to represent a wide range of new social movements accentuating the feminist one. A telling example is the most popular electoral poster of the EA which featured the well known painting ‘The Birth of Aphrodite’ by Boticelli and the electoral campaign’s mottos included: ‘New politics is born’ and ‘New politics is a woman’<sup>5</sup>. When and wherever possible, women were 50% of all candidates in the ballots. Due to the nearly proportional electoral system of those years, the party that in November 1989 won 0,59% of popular vote (translated in 39.130 votes), gained a seat in the

National Greek parliament that was reserved for the delegate who earned the largest number of votes in the first periphery of Athens (where the party obtained its largest percentage nationwide). This delegate was Marina Dizi-Patsourea. The candidates that followed in the number of votes were three more women and one man<sup>6</sup>. This accomplishment was accompanied by the success of women candidates in every electoral periphery they run. Post-election polls showed in fact that the number of women who voted for this party was double to that of men, possibly inspired by the party's campaign for gender equality<sup>7</sup>.

The newly elected MP Marina Dizi, a wage earner with a leftist political past was a member of the *Citizens' Movement for Ecology*, one of the initial 46 groups that founded the Federation and this electoral victory was coupled by the party's gain of one seat also in the elections that followed five months later. In these elections (of April 1990) the party increased its electoral percentage to 0.77% (and 50.868 votes). At that time the largest percentage of votes for the party was recorded in the periphery of Piraeus and there a woman was again first in people's choices, Anastasia Andreadaki. Second was still another woman, Kaiti Iatropoulou and she was followed by two men, Vangelis Doumenis and Polymeris Voglis<sup>8</sup>. According to the principle of annual rotation, these four people would alternate in representation in the four-year parliamentary period to come (1999-1993). The rotation worked for the first year but it stopped at the second delegate. The third elected person could not rotate in parliament since his original candidacy was against the rules of the Federation and to bypass him was considered a potential source of legal and political trouble for the party. So Iatropoulou was asked to remain until 1993 and she conceded. This turned the EA the only Greek party with parliamentary representation exclusively by women (Dizi, Andreadaki and Iatropoulou), a Greek novelty.

The first delegate, Marina Dizi, stated that the country needed a renewed practice of politics that would value the 'female discourse' and give women more chances to participate in decision-making centers while at the same time, she condemned the mass absence of women from the traditional, 'patriarchal' in her own words, political parties<sup>9</sup>. What deserves special attention here is the reference to a women's 'political discourse', a view that can potentially entrap women politicians in bipolar schemes (male-female political discourse) that are considered a priori antithetical and could eventually lead to gender hierarchies. But one can also wonder about the nature and consistency of this 'female discourse'. For Marina Dizi it was apparently portrayed by a sensitivity in ecological concerns and a favourable attitude towards alternative social and political transformations which in the case of EA remained rather vague and undefined. The EA members promoted a political ecology agenda that

comprised plans for further social change including gender equality but they had no common or clear platform as to how they hoped to implement such change.

All three women party delegates used a gender-related outlook and approach to politics that appears consistent to their professed aims. Marina Dizi entered the parliament for the first time holding her little daughter on the one hand and offered flowers to women MPs from other parties. Anastasia Andreadaki had initially refused to serve as an MP because her daughter was at the time at a critical stage of her studies and she was afraid that her mother's publicity would disrupt her study norms. She finally accepted the position after the pressure put on her by the Federation since the next one in votes, Kaiti Iatropoulou, had also initially refused the post because she was pregnant<sup>10</sup>. These women had placed an emphasis on their caring responsibilities for their families and on gender-specific roles (both biological and social) as women (pregnancy and care for their children). Such an attitude was along the lines of an ecofeminist approach, that particularly flourished within the ranks of the international Green parties, at least in the late 1980s, on the organisational principles and declarations of which the Greek EA were based and deserves our attention.

Ecofeminism is a distinct discourse, an amalgam of feminism and environmentalism constructed at different times and places in different ways<sup>11</sup>. Among its main premises is the connection of women with 'nature' at large<sup>12</sup>. The notion of the 'oikos', (the etymological root of ecology which actually means 'home') and a mother's so perceived as 'natural' functions (e.g. care for children) were often associated with the model of 'Mother Nature'. Historically, the oppression and exploitation that women suffered from men was associated with the mishandling and exploitation of nature by patriarchal societies<sup>13</sup>. In this line, Western dualistic thought, which has traditionally separated 'man' from nature, has reinforced oppositional unequal categories of dominance, thereby resulting in a devaluing of nature and all that is associated with it (e.g., women)<sup>14</sup>. According to these views, the common struggles of feminists and ecologists could destroy the present hierarchical social structures and relations of domination at all levels and this destruction is considered 'a natural process'<sup>15</sup>.

Many theories developed under the label of 'ecofeminism' reflect critically upon the women–nature connection as related to the links between body, spirituality, fertility and motherhood<sup>16</sup> and to the ties between women and the Mother-Earth. Roughly speaking, the trend that is broadly defined as 'spiritual (or cultural<sup>17</sup>) ecofeminism' maintain that inverting the male/female, culture/nature dualisms and valorizing the feminine side, allows for the creation of the category 'woman', the celebration of all that is associated with being a

woman, and the creation of a strong alliance in opposition to patriarchy. However, critics had reasonably argued that the valorization of the subordinate ‘woman’ serves to reverse a problematic essentialized dichotomy and perpetuate such gendered stereotypes of women as life givers and eventually reinforce patriarchal hierarchies<sup>18</sup>. In fact, there is an inherent danger in equating women with nature, and this is related to the assumption that men are away from, unrelated to nature<sup>19</sup>.

In our case, the ecofeminist approach of women delegates of the EA was closer to this early, essentialist ecofeminism that dominated the relevant discussion until the late 1980s when Greek ecofeminism was in its formative stage. The essentialist argument that underpinned some of the western (mainly North American and Australian) analyses proposed that women had a particular relationship with nature by virtue of their biology (predominantly as actual or potential child bearers) and that this proximity to nature qualified them to speak more eloquently on nature’s behalf<sup>20</sup>. Different authors have drawn on this position to different degrees and much of the critique of ecofeminism<sup>21</sup> over the past 20 years has focused on the problems associated with essentialism.<sup>22</sup> Nowadays another trend, social ecofeminism, supports a separation of women and nature on the basis that the categories ‘woman’/‘man’/‘nature’/‘culture’ have been socially constructed in ways that devalue both women and nature even though they idealize them.<sup>23</sup>

It is possible that the thoughts and practices of the Greek EA MPs echoed analogous perceptions regarding the equation of women and nature . Hence, and although they sought the eradication of the traditional patriarchal political system through their political rhetoric, in practice they perpetuated conventional views regarding the dichotomy between genders featuring men and women as components of abstract clusters with predetermined roles and attributes. This stance could not lead to the reversal of traditional socio-political edifices since a non-hierarchical social structure could emerge from the acceptance of the multiplicity and fluidity of identities; inversely, references to collective (seemingly inherent) features based on gender, can reproduce dichotomies and eventually new hierarchies.

In practice, the male members of the EA party often disregarded their female delegates. The women MPs were not allowed to express their personal views due to the alleged danger of becoming professional politicians and at press conferences and interviews, messages and notes with the suitable answer were passed to them by the leaders of the main factions who were all men. So the former, unwillingly, became the ideological carriers of the often conflicting views in the Federation. However, and even though these women were often accused of ignorance as well as of lack of political experience, they were quite popular,

played their part in intra-parliament activity and often kept checks and balances among the different factions who tried to control them<sup>24</sup>.

The Federation was eventually led to a major split and disappearance. After a change in its initial Statute in 1992, many left and the definite split came after June 1992 when the last MP Kaiti Iatropoulou accepted the parliament's offer for a tax-free car (an option available to Greek MPs) and employed her husband as her assistant. These moves led to increasing intra-party disgruntlement and accusations for the 'betrayal of people's trust' and she eventually decided to become an independent MP. The FEAO neither recovered from these crises nor did it participate in elections or call meetings after that.

The reasons for the failure of such an alternative democratic experiment were multiple. At first, many of their members had admitted a major weakness of the party, namely a split between words and deeds. Individuals and subgroups that participated in the Federation exercised severe criticism to its administrative authority for it was allegedly 'entrapped in ultra-leftist schemes that alienated many centrists, conservative voters who cared for ecology but did not share leftist political convictions'<sup>25</sup> while the inability of the EA to offer a true alternative solution to the traditional bipolarism between left and right was spotted quite early<sup>26</sup>.

Other researchers presented different suggestions for the EA's failure and dissolution, such as the competition from leftist political parties with similar concerns as well as intra-party factionalism which seems the most plausible explanation. There were three main factions within the EA: the 'environmentalists' (with a rather technocratic approach), the so called 'alternatives' whose perception of ecology was closer to the holistic views of Deep ecology and the 'Leftists' (a multifaceted faction with a leftist core). Concomitant to their dissolution was their loose organisational formula since most groups especially those outside the two main Greek cities of Athens and Thessaloniki were mostly groups of friends rather than structured bodies and the organisation as a whole had an atypical function and vague targets (at the centre of their ideological search was their wish to 'change the world'). Such change was viewed as radical and alternative and not as managerial and they pursued it mostly by personal agency and individual practices. After the electoral successes, the differences among the different factions surfaced and the factions were further stabilised in powerful cores<sup>27</sup>.

Among the most important reasons for the fast decline of the Federation was quoted the lack of an independent autonomous movement which would counteract the absence of a solid party structure<sup>28</sup>, the development of which should have been first achieved through

social processes before their electoral adventure<sup>29</sup>. The reason for the Federation's decision to participate in the elections was quoted as 'the need to bring about a massive ecological movement in Greece<sup>30</sup>'. But already in 1990, critics of the Federation mentioned that it had abandoned 'any attempt for action towards a movement and is transformed in a group of 30-40 agents who limit their discussions to organisational and administrative issues with no solid political basis<sup>31</sup>'.

The non-existence of a massive environmental movement within the Greek society was combined with the lack of a solid structure, a fact that was not the case for other successful Green parties in the western world. The absence of a clear democratic framework for the internal operation of the Federation was thought to lead to eco-populism and the necessity of its political redefinition was deemed urgent<sup>32</sup>. Despite their relative success and the earning of a parliamentary seat, the EA felt prey to their often hasty and haphazard attitude<sup>33</sup> while their declarations for direct democracy and their criticism to the notion of representation contrasted with their ignorance regarding procedures and rules of dialogue and respect for counter-discourse that should be among the main constituents of direct democracy in the framework of the Federation and of society as a whole<sup>34</sup>. One of them stated that direct democracy 'does not mean to ask people about their opinion on issues that are unintelligible to them. As Cornelius Castoriades argued it is meaningless to ask people to give opinions [in a poll like manner] if they cannot do it with knowledge after considerable deliberation<sup>35</sup>'.

Panhellenic conferences were held just to prove the level of disagreement regarding issues of immediate concern, for instance whether the party will have a direct or indirect organisational structure and at the end the General assembly of the member groups emerged as omnipotent while the party's secretariat had the limited responsibility to execute the assembly's decisions. This formula proved impossible to function since the members of the secretariat were renewed every 15 days. In short, there were numerous political, personal and ideological differences<sup>36</sup>. For many Federation members, a comprehensive programme and direct democracy contradicted each other. They wished to practice politics and change society, but, at the same time, they avoided a broad course of action<sup>37</sup> that should eventually move beyond the ecology sphere.

The failure of their enterprise is further associated with a weakness in finding satisfactory means of exercising alternative politics within a western representative parliamentary system of government. A hitherto dominant tendency in movements theory draws dividing lines between them and the state and view them as separate entities that operate based on exclusive terms of conflict. So the supporters of this view believe that it is

impossible to place the movement within the state since the movement by definition challenges the established political order. A contrasting view had shown that since both the states and the social movements consist of acting subjects, individual or collective, there are many ways in which the two ends of the, so far considered, conflict, meet<sup>38</sup> since quite often, the same subjects can participate both in state institutions and in the social movements. The social movements have group and individual members within the state which in various historical eras displayed different degrees of participation and the encounter of the state and movements influences the strategies, the process and the outcomes of the latter<sup>39</sup>. The state becomes the point of reference for the creation of interest groups and for the mobilization of citizens<sup>40</sup>.

As Nicos Poulantzas had claimed, all social movements (including the environmentalist and the feminist) to the degree that they are political, are placed at the strategic field of the state due to political necessity. They do have political results and influences on the state. The new social movements reflect class conflicts but they are not limited to this. Many overcome the institutions of representative democracy and they promote the perspective of self-management. But when the movements which support direct democracy fell into the net of the state they are incorporated, weakened and dissolved as they identify with its administrative structure because of the particular material nature of state mechanism<sup>41</sup>.

During the 1970s and 1980s the main social movements which were activated away from the places of production were by nature multi- and inter-class. Indeed, Alain Touraine called the feminist and the environmentalist movements 'cultural' since they were based on cultural claims<sup>42</sup>. The EA sought to influence the state structures working through a traditional and established institutional and political formation and simultaneously to inspire the emergence of a massive alternative movement. However, political parties confronted the movements was not only based on inclusion but also on the latter's strangulation. The movements which were transformed into parties, on the other hand, risked to lose their particularity since there was always the risk of dissolution within the party<sup>43</sup> as they failed to uphold radical action that would provide guidance for the future<sup>44</sup>. Generally speaking, a movement can inspire with its example, provide answers to certain questions and give birth to new inquiries regarding society and politics but the electoral adventure of the nascent Greek ecological movement in a fragmentary and disorganized manner could only be accounted as a sort of assimilation and absorption by the dominant elites and as practically, albeit unwillingly, assisting the continuous operation of the status quo<sup>45</sup>.

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## Endnotes

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<sup>1</sup> Schizas, 1989: 12. Radical democratic politics as defined by Chantal Mouffe comprise a common political identity of persons who are bound together by “their common recognition of a set of ethico-political values. In this case citizenship... is an articulating principle that affects the different subject positions of the social agent while allowing for a plurality of specific allegiances and for the respect of individual liberty... It should lead to a common recognition among different groups struggling for an extension and radicalization of democracy that they have a common concern and that in choosing their actions they should subscribe to certain rules of conduct” (Mouffe, 1992: 235-236). This notion of citizenship is quite appropriate to the development of social movements.

<sup>2</sup> Botetsagias, 2003: 85-87.

<sup>3</sup> Modinos, 1989: 6.

<sup>4</sup> Newspaper *Eleftherotypia*, 7/11/1989: 17.

<sup>5</sup> *Eleftherotypia*, 7/11/1989: 13.

<sup>6</sup> *Eleftherotypia*, 7/11/1989: 17.

<sup>7</sup> *Eleftherotypia*, 27/03/1990: 20-21.

<sup>8</sup> *Eleftherotypia*, 10/4/1990: 6.

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- <sup>9</sup> *Eleftherotypia*, 24/11/1989: 15.
- <sup>10</sup> Newspaper *Ta Nea*, 10/04/1990: 16.
- <sup>11</sup> Buckingham, 2004: 146.
- <sup>12</sup> Plant, 1998: 123.
- <sup>13</sup> Collard and Contrucci, 1998: 127-128.
- <sup>14</sup> McDowell, 1991 as reported in Wilson 2005: 346.
- <sup>15</sup> Plant, 1998: 125.
- <sup>16</sup> See Biehl, 1991 and Shiva, 1988.
- <sup>17</sup> Buckingham, 2004: 147.
- <sup>18</sup> Rose, 1993 and Dodd, 1997.
- <sup>19</sup> Wilson, 2005: 351.
- <sup>20</sup> See, for example, Spretnak, 1989 and Daly, 1978.
- <sup>21</sup> Well articulated in Biehl, 1991.
- <sup>22</sup> Buckingham, 2004: 147.
- <sup>23</sup> Wilson, 2005: 333-338.
- <sup>24</sup> Botetsagias, 2003.
- <sup>25</sup> Chatzibiros, 1989: 9.
- <sup>26</sup> Modinos, 1991: 6.
- <sup>27</sup> Botetsagias, 2003: 79 These cores promoted two kinds of agendas: The peripheral groups were monothematic in their concern only for the environment and rather apolitical, wishing to use the FEAO as an umbrella organisation to represent them in a dialogue with the state and other political parties while the groups from the major cities were more politicised, *ibid*.
- <sup>28</sup> Paraskevopoulos, 1991: 54. The absence of a massive Greek ecological grass-root movement that would constitute the necessary ground for the corresponding political action was deemed as problematic from the very onset of the establishment of the Federation and its subsequent development.
- <sup>29</sup> Chatzibiros, 1989: 8-9.
- <sup>30</sup> Louloudis-Modinos interview, 1989: 23.
- <sup>31</sup> Diakos, 1990: 60.
- <sup>32</sup> Modinos, 1991: 6-7.
- <sup>33</sup> *Eleftherotypia*, 19/04/1990: 9.
- <sup>34</sup> Schizas, 1989: 12-13. The conferences of the Federation were termed as contests of the 'loudest voice' and full of factionalism by many of those who participated in them, *Politis*, 1989: 10.
- <sup>35</sup> Quoted in Schizas, 1989: 13.
- <sup>36</sup> Stevis, 1993.
- <sup>37</sup> Athanasopoulos-Kalomalos, 1990: 56.
- <sup>38</sup> Banaszak, 2002.
- <sup>39</sup> Banaszak, 2002: 2.
- <sup>40</sup> Connell, 1990 : 523-531.
- <sup>41</sup> Althousser et al.: 61-66.
- <sup>42</sup> Touraine, 2002 : 91-92.
- <sup>43</sup> Althousser et al. : 61-76.
- <sup>44</sup> Buckingham, 2004: 153.
- <sup>45</sup> Louloudis-Modinos interview, 1989: 23-25.