

## **"Another world is possible as long as it is feminist too": dissenting discourses and acts by Greek leftist feminists**

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### **Abstract**

*The present note draws upon the example of Greek feminists who undertook action against sexist perceptions underlying the leftist political formations in which they participated. The perspective of gender as a powerful tool of political analysis seems indispensable to Greek feminists who experienced gender biases within the leftist movement and expressed their concerns regarding the persistence of patriarchal structures. They are motivated by a "politics of lived experience" approach to activist struggle, a concept that has been recently re-introduced in the feminist discourse. Along with the local bases of their concerns they are closely connected to transnational networks such as the World March of Women, an anti-capitalist and anti-patriarchal group. It is on this basis that the Greek feminists, similarly to their international counterparts, encourage alternative social movements to fight against patriarchy within the movements and insist that the envisioned "another world" will not be radically transformed and alternative unless it is based on feminist premises.*

The issue of leftists' sexism is old but persistent. Greek feminists had uneasy relationships with their male comrades during the "second wave" feminist movement in Greece immediately after the end of the military junta in 1974. The parties of the Left (the traditional / "orthodox" KKE and the euro-communist KKE interior) established women's organizations that were subjected to traditional party hierarchy and were regarded by many feminists as additional pools of voters rather than grassroots sources of radical social change and the elimination of patriarchy. In turn, the autonomous, leftist, feminist groups that started to appear in the major urban centers during the mid-1970s, were viewed with distrust by many members of the parliamentary Left that saw autonomous feminism as a mere imitator of Western practices which at the time were chastised as American, thus capitalist, values.

For their part, and in the atmosphere of increasing politicization of social life, autonomous feminists tried hard to convince their male counterparts of their true commitment to socialist and communist ideology, overlooking at times the value of gender as a forceful tool for political analysis. Weary of ideological conflicts (Varika 2000) with state feminism and associated reformist practices introduced in the early 1980s, the "second wave" autonomous movement in Greece stagnated towards the end of the 1980s.

The feminist fight against sexism within political parties and associations of the Left has many parallels in the West. Since the emergence of the women's liberation movement in the 1960s, gender was often overshadowed by other issues on the agenda of leftist political leaders (Gray-Rosendale and Rosendale 2005). Such prioritisations frequently revealed

differing approaches to institutional politics and definitions of power (e.g. in the case of Italy) between the autonomous feminists and the left-wing party organisations and trade unions (Gómez Sánchez and Martín Sevillano 2006: 350-351). Throughout the 1970s and 1980s in various European countries, feminists uncomfortably found themselves “in and against” parties of the Left (Benn 1987; Lovenduski 1986).

In Greece, society remained quite traditional and androcentric, but it was not until the late 1990s that an increasing number of autonomous feminist groups started to re-appear, often in concert with the anti-globalisation movement and the development of international and local social forums. These feminist groups are associated with the Left of the political spectrum, particularly with the so called *Coalition of the Radical Left and Progress* (Syriza) that officially appeared in 2004, though its formation goes back to 2001. The *Coalition* is linked to the politics of European and World Social Forums on which leftist feminists based their hopes for “another possible world as long as it is a feminist one” (Kontothanassi and Pentaraki 2006). Male comrades often prioritized class struggle against neoliberal globalisation over other structural social inequalities (such as gender asymmetries). This oversight disturbed contemporary leftist feminist women in Greece who, in turn, emphasized their different experiences as women to articulate innovative partisanship within the leftist movement. Here I plan to focus on the nature of these experiences and on how feminists used political praxis to counteract the discomfort and marginalization they experienced within parties of the radical Left.

Although they work towards gender equality, the women members of the KKE (a party which currently has a female secretary general) are not included within the definition of “leftist feminists” I use here for the following reasons: First, for the most part, they do not characterize themselves as feminists since they view feminism as a movement with bourgeois origins working independently and, at times, against class struggle. Thus, they do not value the concept of gender as an essential tool for political analysis and they do not have a distinct public presence as leftist feminists; in turn, they are strictly loyal to party lines and consistently refuse to be called “feminists”. Second, they discredit anti-globalisation movements and struggles and consider meetings such as the Social Forums as haphazard and inept. Therefore, my references to leftist feminists do not include women KKE members in this particular note.

Leftist feminists are commonly self-described as women with a clear understanding of gender oppression who consider this oppression a chief human problem and struggle for a society free from gender-based and other (e.g. class) inequalities. The feminist question, simply posed, is “how can I, the leftist feminist, come into terms with gender discrimination within the leftist movement”? In a meaningful expression of complaint the women members of the *Coalition of the Radical Left* maintained that: “We have participated in social and political struggles within and outside organizations for the introduction of a gender perspective in politics and in the Left. We are distressed to realize that male-dominated structures in the *Coalition of the Left* and the neglect of persistent gender hierarchies still prevail and that we are now way behind even from what we had gained during the last few decades” (*Women of Syriza Network* declaration, 2008).

Given that Greek leftist women are up against the male privilege they encounter within parties of the Left, they undertook original political initiatives. To use a rather far fetched analogy from Gramsci, they moved from a war of position to a war of maneuver (frontal

attack), the most representative expression of which was a novel and innovative coalition group called *Women for another Europe*. The group was hastily and urgently organized just three weeks before the European elections of June 2004 and the ballot was exclusively made up of women; a fact noticeably unprecedented in Greece. Most of them had already established a public presence in political parties, organizations, women's groups and the anti-globalisation movement.

They insisted that the common thread which tied them together was not their biological makeup as women but their distinctive viewpoint concerning politics. Men were not part of the ballot not because they didn't or couldn't work with them successfully but because these women did not wish to create just another, "conventional" party. Instead, they attempted to clearly condemn the hierarchical structure of the Greek political parties (even the ones of the Left). This ballot brought the problems of women (working, unemployed, housewives, victims of violence) to the fore of public discourse, as well as urban and environmental concerns they claimed to perceive differently than men. They addressed their call to people of the Left, to anyone concerned and foremost, to women. Their European objective was to work towards a social and political Europe that would give voice to the citizens and not to the leaders.

An all-female ballot was the aspiration of leftist feminists for a long time. However, it was not until 2004 that they decided to move ahead with it, exasperated by the persistence of leftist political procedures that continued to marginalize women's voices. With the exclusively female ballot, "they did not wish to make a spectacular but rather a symbolic move" (*Women for Another Europe* Interview, 2004). The effort was met with unanticipated success (Mpompoulou 2004) since the coalition ranked seventh in votes, first among the parties which did not elect a representative in the European parliament<sup>1</sup>.

This effort remained unique and was not followed by a new electoral attempt in the 2009 European elections. Instead, many of the same women created the *Panhellenic Network of women in the Leftist Coalition* in March 2008, claiming that "we are here to declare that we will not accept gender inequality, particularly on the part of the Left". Although they acknowledge that the Left is structured and operates within the tight framework of a patriarchal society, they still believe that "women's and feminist struggles within the broader alternative globalisation movements and the Left in other European countries have earned a better place and equal representation for women in party and movement structure. [In Greece, however], party conferences, panel discussions and the public image of the *Leftist Coalition* is male-dominated and women's issues are marginalized despite the existence of many and capable women members and despite the fact that the *Coalition* appeals more to women than men...." (*Women of Syriza Network* declaration, 2008)

Most of those who questioned sexist practices of their male comrades constitute the core members of the Greek section of an international network called the *World March of Women*. Its *Declaration of Values*, inspired by contemporary expressions of globalised feminist activism, refers to the potential of "building a peaceful world, free from

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<sup>1</sup> The coalition gained 46.565 votes, corresponding to the 0.76% of the popular vote. During these elections of 1999, the percentage of votes for the *Coalition of the Left* was reduced approximately by 1%. See the official results of the 2004 elections for the European Parliament at the site of the Greek Ministry of Interior, [http://www.ypes.gr/ekloges/content/gr/elec\\_data/2004UE\\_epi\\_res.asp](http://www.ypes.gr/ekloges/content/gr/elec_data/2004UE_epi_res.asp), last accessed on 24/11/2009.

exploitation and oppression, a world in which people enjoy full human rights, social justice, democracy and gender equality... In short, we believe that together we can and must build another world". This statement implies a radical transformation of societies which, they claim, can be achieved through "resistance to neoliberal globalisation, war, racism, poverty and all forms of discrimination... To advance women's liberation... it is important to ally with other social movements and strengthen our cooperation through common action".<sup>2</sup>

A primary objective of the *World March of Women* is to challenge the legitimacy of international military and economic structures and, at the same time, to encourage alternative social movements to challenge the sexist perceptions underlying their practices and fight against patriarchy even within movements. This is what the Greek feminists sought to do within the Greek leftist *Coalition*.

In an attempt to contextualise the activism of Greek feminists, I would like to refer to the significant notion of the "politics of experience". It is a concept vested with a variety of meanings and connotations and was dear to the feminist circles of the 1970s and 1980s as a key term to the interpretation of women's social experience and the formation of a collective consciousness (Mulinari and Sandell 1999: 288). In Greece, as well as in other societies where patriarchy persists, feminist activists reclaim the notion of experience not just as the collective, female social experience of patriarchy but also in a way which combines the embodied, lived subjective experience with women's collective consciousness and locates it within specific historical circumstances. The concept has been re-introduced both in feminist theory and in activism primarily by Chandra Mohanty, whose work focuses on transnational and post-colonial feminist theory ascribing value and significance to multifarious sources of feminist activism (Mohanty 2003: 106-123). Through her work she strives "to strike a careful balance between the discursive and the material, between experience and theory, and refuses to privilege one term over the other. Instead, she argues forcefully that feminist struggles are fought on both an ideological, representational level and an experiential, everyday level; thus she reminds us that the value of theory resides finally in its political effectiveness" (Cupples 2005).

Greek feminist voiced the argument that women's lived experiences shape distinct female discourses. In their own words: "A female discourse is very much based on experience. Our arguments, our public positions and actions are oriented or derive from what we have experienced as women, experiences that are very different from those of men. We also think that this female discourse is very complicated. This is not to say that a male discourse is simplistic but that the female one takes into account a wide variety of parameters that men do not always do. Plus, female discourse is usually less rhetoric than that of men and its current marginalization constitutes a deficiency both for the political discourse of the Left and for politics at large" (Interview of two Greek feminists at Modlich, 2004/5). This female discourse goes beyond any essentialist conceptualization of femininity; rather, it attempts to create a fissure in the current political synthesis of the Greek leftist parties, to contest conventionally reified identities and to reinvent new ways of acting and thinking.

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<sup>2</sup> See the aforementioned 'Declaration of Values' at the site of the *World March of Women*, [http://www.marchemondiale.org/qui\\_nous\\_sommes/valeurs/en/base\\_view](http://www.marchemondiale.org/qui_nous_sommes/valeurs/en/base_view), last accessed on 24/11/2009.

This return to personal experience can potentially include certain ideological traps since it could lead to an individualistic and apolitical conceptualization of experience. Therefore, the notion itself and its role for political action has long been contested by those who suggested that the simple narration of personal experience runs the risk of been too empirical. Mohanty-inspired scholars advocate the view that experience is informed by politics and interpreted in a variety of ways. As experience is conditioned by sociopolitical and cultural frames, we can use its interpretation to analyze and criticize them (Stone-Mediatore 1998: 117-120). In this case, women's experiences are informed not only by their leftist political ideas but also by their attachment to feminist theory and praxis. It is the politics of gender that shapes their interpretation of experience.

One can see the relevance of experience regarding political commitment and the prospect of creating common political projects. Experience motivates and informs participation in political struggles. In this way, lived experiences and their narration by marginalized women are crucial to radical feminist praxis through the making of an "oppositional consciousness," which is more than resistance and can actually contribute to a community awareness, disrupt the private and public divide in favour of a reinterpretation of the historical context in which such experiences are formed and, in turn, lead to the articulation of subjecthood, political agency and struggle (Stone-Mediatore 1998: 120-125; Mohanty 1991). In our specific example, this "oppositional consciousness" is formed not only against the capitalist world but also against patriarchal structures of traditional parties.

The worth of lived experience for activist work is considerable. The alliance of activist women, through their everyday experiences of sexism, facilitate the movement's direction towards an increasingly open and collaborative course of action. Moreover, it weakens essentialist assumptions regarding women and helps activists comprehend the interplay between their own agency and socio-political context. Individual lived experiences can successfully produce a "feminist perspective that claims it is possible to produce knowledge about the world that can and should be used to name, illuminate and overcome social inequalities" (Mulinari and Sandell 1999: 294).

There is an inherent contradiction in the fact that one can fight against the capitalist state and war as part of a movement within which he embodies and reproduces the power structure, authority and hierarchy of patriarchal societies. All those who employ androcentric practices within the leftist, anti-globalisation movement, eventually disregard the practices of such social movements and the value of solidarity in struggle. In the current state of crisis, the actions of the leftist women's movement seem more appropriate than ever. Women are particularly hit by the crisis and leftist movements will develop and succeed not by placing women's concerns at the margins, but at the forefront of their struggles.

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