
The mother binary: fundamental conflicts facing women within the green movement, with reference to continental Green parties and the 21st-century ecofeminism debate

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Abstract: The issue of whether caring, mothering, and nurturing is something to be escaped, celebrated, or androgynised presents particular challenges to feminists in the green movement. From the German Green Party in the early and mid 1980s to the Third World ecofeminists of today, the debate has proved a central site of unresolved conflict for a movement essentially concerned with ecology and nature. This paper explores the relatively new theory of ecofeminist citizenship, which seeks to value traditional female caring roles as an act of citizenship, and suggests that it offers significant possibilities for finding a way forward.

Keywords: gender; women; ecofeminism; politics; environmentalism; Europe.

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1 Introduction

Many observers of green political parties have observed a fundamental tension within them. During their foundational and subsequent periods, these parties have struggled between being a movement and being a political party within a traditional representative democratic structure [Kaelberer, (1993), p.229]. This example of a binary tension seems to reoccur in many situations, and has often been translated, explicitly or implicitly, into a tension between the more radical and the more 'moderate', focused on electoral success. In commonly extrapolated German terms, the more radical are known as the 'Fundis' and the more moderate as the 'Realos'. Often tensions regarding women's policies and representation have been viewed across the same divide.

This paper argues that the focus of conflicts within the European green parties and the ecofeminist movement cannot be so simply identified. By looking at the development of

the policies and practices of the Green Party – within the German Democratic Republic and later within unified Germany – and at more recent debates among thinkers and actors broadly identified as ‘ecofeminist’, it is possible to identify a more foundational, less tactical, debate that reaches the heart of the understanding of both ‘feminist’ and ‘green’.

2 Women in European green parties

Green parties across Europe are distinguished from other parties by the fact that a general commitment to gender equality/equity is part of their founding principles, usually enshrined in their foundational or early constitutional documents. In the case of Les Verts in France, the commitment to gender parity is stated as, ‘the principle that internal distribution of responsibilities and external representation of the party as green candidates in elections should be divided equally between men and women’ – additionally, the principle at conferences was that speakers from each sex should be called alternately [Drugan, (2003), p.21]. The founding statement of the German Greens (SPV) makes explicit its links with the New Social Movements (NSMs):

“We feel solidarity with all those who have become active in the new democratic movement: the life and nature groups, the environmental protection groups, the citizen initiative organisations, the workmen’s movement, the Christian initiative organisations, the movements for peace, human rights, women’s rights and Third World rights.” [Talshir, (2002), p.24]

These high ideals have unfortunately not always been lived out in practice. In France, the 1988 Green presidential candidate Antoine Waechter, headed a 1991 regional election list of five green candidates, all male. He explained this by stating that “les femmes ne s’interessent pas a la politique” [“Women aren’t interested in politics”] [Drugan, (2003), p.21]. For the German Greens, Regina Michalik noted in 1985: “Well up to a certain point, it’s easy to get something from the Greens: money, a female delegate, an electoral list with equal gender representation. But only if it doesn’t touch up our men’s hot spots – namely take away their power” [quoted in Pinl, (1998), p.128].

It is not, however, the intention of this paper to explore such predictable tensions. It would perhaps also be unfair to focus on these issues, for while Greens’ records are far from ideal, they are generally better than that of other political parties across Europe. It has been noted for example in France that Les Verts are ‘at the top of the table for the number of women in positions of responsibility’ [Allwood and Wadia, (2000), p.56], and that in 1988, a foreign commentator could barely contain their obvious excitement that ‘women hold 24 of the 42 Green Party seats in the Bundestag’ [Moore, (1988), p.581]. Instead, it begins by looking at how women’s issues played out in a practical way in the development of the German Greens. Although the founding statement of 1980 had linked the party to women’s movements, Mayer and Ely (1998) conclude that it only began to develop a feminist profile in 1983–1984, when women’s affairs officers and ‘working groups on women’ were established at both the national and state levels, antidiscrimination legislation was proposed, and the AK6 (‘working circle’) of female parliamentarians was established [Mayer and Ely, (1998), p.12]. Die Grüne would give birth to the then-radical idea of the Feminat, the all-female executive committee of 1984–1985 [Katzenstein and McClurg, (1987), p.191].

Underlying all of this was a generally agreed political approach and strategy for achieving women's needs, with a focus on access to the workplace, anti-discrimination laws, and access to contraception and abortion rights. This approach argued that with domestic and waged labour combined, women performed about two-thirds of the labour in society, and that the only solution to this fundamental inequality was to abolish the traditional description for nurturing, caring attitudes and actions as 'female' [Mayer and Ely, (1998), p.14].

The apparent consensus, however, broke down with the publication of the 'Mother's Manifesto' in March 1987, which claimed that this approach had favoured childless, independent and skilled women and led to the 'ghettoisation of mothers'. Three prominent Green women 'went over' to this 'side', and for years the debate continued to consume large amounts of time and energy [Pinl, (1998), p.133]. They added an ecological touch to the argument by claiming that a focus on careers would take women's time and energy away from creating environmentally friendly households [Mayer and Ely, (1998), p.14].

The effects of this conflict are also visible in a subsequent debate about rape law, which broadened the definition of rape to include offences previously reduced to a petty crime (basically all those offences not involving severe physical injury). The dispute, however, came over penalties. The Greens were traditionally highly suspicious of the prison system, and the 'sledgehammer of jail'. For this reason, many argued that the minimum penalty for rape, now that 'less severe' cases were included, should be dropped from two years to one. After an ensuing, vicious two-year debate, the draft bill was reintroduced with the two year penalty, but also with an added strategy of reducing violence by 'bringing the two sexes closer together' [Pinl, (1998), pp.134–135]. This debate was also entangled in other factional debates which saw the 'radical feminists' linked with the Fundis and the 'post-feminist' wing with the Realos.

3 Ecofeminism in the 21st Century

The 'career women versus mothers' debate might seem antiquated today – a question that's now been seen regularly on the pages of Britain's daily newspapers over past of decades. But it contains within it, specifically on the 'mothers' side', seeds of a new radical approach that was to develop, in academia, and in parts of the developing world, over the next two decades: ecofeminism. The ecofeminist position in short says that ecological crisis is a result of patriarchal thinking [Orenstein, (1994), p.1094]. For the prominent feminist theorist Luce Irigaray, women can be environmental saviours because they are not truly responsible objects within the patriarchal culture [Conley, (1997), p.133]. This paper is not going to define and discuss ecofeminism itself, but there is one particular aspect, prominent especially in the past decade, that it should specifically examine. This aspect is the valorising of 'grassroots women's actions', described by the prominent Australian ecofeminist, Ariel Salleh (1996, p.271): "It is plain from women's ecological actions across the globe – the 300-year-old tradition of Chipko tree huggers, the peasant mothers of Seveso, Australian Koori women anti-base activists – that it is empathetic nurture rather than any sophisticated social theory that guides these sound and genuinely universalized political stands". Taken further, these results eventually in a total questioning of party political actions, such as those of the German Greens. Kaplan (2004,

p.5) wrote: “The opposite of the secret ballot, participatory democracy incorporates people into the body politic in very public ways.” Irigaray argues that the fight against environmental abuses have to go back to less technologically developed regions to formulate cultural change [Conley, (1997), p.133]. This is an approach that with varying degrees of explicitness rejects decades, even centuries, of feminist theory and reverts to the female body and its lived experience – preferably a lived experience involving a minimum of modernity, in search of authenticity.

There is only now developing a critique of this approach, and particularly the reification of the ‘grass roots’ as a justifying principle, something seen as morally trumping any academic theory. It is not an easy thing to do. It does not have to involve criticism of the actions of such women as the Nobel Peace Prize winner Wangari Maathai and her Greenbelt Movement. Nor does it deny that women as mothers and political actors can be used for powerful political rhetoric, as in the US case of Mothers and Others for Pesticide Limits (also helped by the power of celebrity with Meryl Streep as chair), which forced the removal of the Alar from US and foreign markets [Orenstein and Zemp, (1994), p.1096]. It does, however, question whether this should be the sole source of theory and action.

An example of this is found in MacGregor’s (2006, pp.182-183) *Beyond Mothering Earth*. She notes research in the west, particularly America, showing that women doing this work may actively reject not only traditional politics, but even the label of ‘activist’, some preferring ‘volunteer’ or ‘advocate’ or ‘civic or community’ work, or even ‘just what needed to be done’. This can be understood as an extreme reprivatisation of the political, the exact reverse of the traditional feminist project. For a political movement such as the broad green movement, this could have the potential to be extremely dangerous as well, encouraging fragmentation, disengagement, and at the extreme could potentially cause the collapse of collective political action.

MacGregor (2006, p.219, original italics) argues instead for the eschewing of identity politics, and for making ‘citizenship the local struggle that animates and articulates an internally complex ecofeminist agenda’. She suggests this is one productive way to “develop ecofeminist positions that are both *feminist* and *democratic* because it provides a space for the public performance of the multiple and shifting identities that women simultaneously hold ... allows women’s expression of (and resistance to) *who* they are rather than *what* they are in patriarchal-capitalist-racist-(hetero)-sexist societies”. She adds: “What makes feminist ecological citizenship distinct from other approaches is that it refuses the privatization and feminisation of care and calls for public debate and action on how foundational acts of labour (e.g., care) can be reorganised to allow women’s equal participation as citizens. Care is thereby politicised as a necessary part of citizenship.” [MacGregor, (2006), p.220]. Citizenship as a concept is useful here as an established public role, and one that the practice of the past century has developed as a potentially female, indeed at the grassroots of volunteering and local community groups a primarily female, role. And it is not related to the gender of the body that is performing the role. This is very new work, and as of yet little translated into practical politics, but it may offer a way out of ecofeminist body as politics reprivatisation that has perversely declared female political efforts as properly part of the private sphere, divorced from, and denying the validity of, ‘male politics’.

Here, the debates are separated between the political activity and the ‘philosophical’, but of course there was cross-over. For example, the late Petra Kelly stated:

“Women must lead the efforts in education, peace awareness, because only she, I feel, can go back to her womb, her roots, her natural rhythms, her inner self for harmony and peace, while men, most of them anyway, are continually bound to their power struggle, the exploitation of nature, and military ego trip.”
[Quoted in Talshir, (2002), p.76]

This is a quote that brings back together the two sides of the discussion, of practical politics and of feminist theory – something that green politics has always tried to do. As the 2001 Charte des Verts Moniaux declared, ‘tous les processus ecologiques, sociaux et économiques sont interdependants’ [all ecological, social and economic processes are interdependent] [Drugan, (2003), p.64].

“When I’m talking about politics rooted in the body, it is appropriate to state my own position here. I’m a childless by choice woman of 42, who is far from atypical of my generation, and sometimes irritated by the conflation of women and mothers. And I’m far from atypical, when you consider that around 30% of women around my age in Scotland are childless.” (Johnston, 2005).

That is still a minority, but a substantial one. And given that greens in general are concerned about population growth, that is certainly something they should at least be comfortable with.

As the German example shows, feminist politics have struggled to find a comfortable place within the green movement – and probably also in other progressive political movements – because of an internal struggle. This is a struggle over who women want to be, how they want to define themselves, what role both their sex and gender play in defining them as political actors.

This is a bind from which after decades women surely must extract themselves. In its broadest sense, citizenship suggests being a caring member of a society, whether that means being a school governor, sitting with an aged relative or neighbour, or indeed hands-on parenting – necessarily understood as a service to society, not a private act. Perhaps the notion of citizenship thus provides a route from this conflictual circle.

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