

Ecofeminism in Europe: A Social Movement from the 1980s

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ABSTRACT

At the intersection of the feminist, ecological and pacifist movements, ecofeminism emerged simultaneously in Europe, the United States and Australia in the latter half of the 1970s. Influenced by counter-cultural, utopian feminism, the new theory targeted patriarchy as responsible for women's oppression, the exploitation of the Earth, and the militarization of international relations. In the Cold War context of the early 1980s, when a vast peace movement opposed the deployment of Pershing missiles on European soil, women identifying as ecofeminists began mobilizing in England, East and West Germany, Scandinavia, and elsewhere. They invented new forms of struggle based on occupations, women's-only camps and festive actions. In the late 1980s, the end of the Cold War marked the end of ecofeminism as a social movement, but its ideas would spread through international conferences and women's studies and other university departments.



Badge in support of the protests at Greenham Common. Source : [Wikimedia Commons](#). Greenham Common Women's Peace Camp, founded in 1981, was located just outside of the Greenham Common Royal Air Force base in Berkshire, England.



“Embracing the base,” Greenham Common (West Berkshire, Great Britain), December 1982. Source : [Wikimedia Commons](#).

In a post-#MeToo context of both heightened feminist awareness and increasing opposition to global warming, new activist women are once again mobilizing ecofeminism, which has become part of the political landscape among political activists on a national level (in France and Spain) and among climate activists. The term ecofeminism began to be used by women activists in the 1970s in Europe, the United States and Australia as a critique of the patriarchal system, which they saw as responsible in concomitant and intertwined ways for both gender inequality and exploitation of the environment. Currently applied to highly diverse realities ranging from environmental justice to mobilizations of women from the Global South and indigenous women, the term has had several heydays, from the antinuclear struggle of the 1970s to the field of environmental philosophy in the 1990s, via the struggle for peace and against the deployment of nuclear weapons in the 1980s.

Ecofeminism under Construction in the 1970s

It is difficult to pinpoint one or two precise dates that clearly mark the birth of ecofeminism. Drawing on a utopian feminist cultural matrix, it was under construction in the 1970s and emerged at the intersection of several protest practices among activists from the environmentalist, ecological, pacifist and antinuclear movements. After the effervescence of May 1968, the 1970s were marked by a proliferation of struggles. In that context, nuclear-power-plant construction in Western Europe and the United States ran into determined resistance, which women were a large and visible part of. That was particularly true in 1975 in Wyhl, West Germany, where the proposed site of a nuclear power plant was occupied for nine months. Like in Marckolsheim, on the French side of the Franco-German border zone, a year earlier, that victorious occupation was made possible thanks to the active participation of women from the village who created a collective called the Badische Frauen-Initiative. Women’s engagement in those actions and occupations did not go unnoticed. The French writer and activist Françoise d’Eaubonne first

coined the term “ecofeminism” in 1974. The following year, using a pseudonym, she proclaimed herself to be one in a communiqué claiming responsibility for bombing the Fessenheim plant, which was then under construction. Although most of the women involved in environmental struggle during those years weren’t militant feminists, and feminists involved in ecology didn’t necessarily connect the dots between feminism and ecology, women’s substantial presence in pro-ecology, anti-nuclear mobilizations, illustrates a politicization of struggles based on gendered identities.

Over the course of that decade, an outlook that we can, in retrospect, describe as ecofeminist began to develop on the fringes of transnational, counter-cultural feminism. In the United States and Europe, feminists, principally lesbians, began founding “womyn’s” communities with a focus on reconnecting with Mother Earth. Those women were putting into practice an interest in growing their own food, as well as utopian beliefs and sometimes spiritual quests. From Kvindelandet, in Denmark to the area near Toulouse, France, from Oregon to West Germany, “lesbian travelers” spread feminist social science fiction (Joanna Russ), theoretical texts (Susan Griffin, Mary Daly), health practices (self-help, herbal treatments and more), an interest in green building methods and in the interconnectedness of all living things in their wake. In West Germany, the fight against nuclear power plants was one of the crucibles of articulation between the anti-nuclear movement and that form of counter-cultural feminism. In Gorleben in 1980, for example, womyn’s-only actions were organized that drew on those utopian references.

Pacifism and Ecofeminism during the Euromissile Crisis

In the early 1980s, a series of international events contributed to a mutation in social movements. Both the accident at the Three Mile Island nuclear power plant (Pennsylvania, USA) and the Euromissile crisis strengthened antinuclear and pacifist mobilizations. Within that movement, which surprised observers by the number of demonstrators it rallied, some highly mobilized women declared themselves to be ecofeminists, reprising the term suggested by the eco-socialist activist Ynestra King at a conference organized in the United States in March, 1980. The label was picked up by the Women and Life on Earth (WLOE) network, which sprang from that event, and began to circulate within a hazily defined environment at the intersection of feminism, pacifism and ecology, without being appropriated by the full range of women working for peace. Nevertheless, the actions of those women for peace were shaded with the utopian culture of the 1970s, which targeted the connections between patriarchy and militarism.

In 1981, Scandinavian feminists organized a march from Stockholm to Paris. That was soon followed by one leaving from Wales for Greenham Common, in England, where women decided to occupy the lands around a military base day and night, and to keep the occupation women-only. In West Germany, die-ins against civilian nuclear power began in Cologne in 1979, blocking trains carrying rockets in 1983, and there were bike rides from one military base to the next, calls for women’s strikes and women-only demonstrations. The practice of women-only occupations and camps spread from the experience at Greenham Common to Comiso (Sicily); Soesterberg (the Netherlands), North America and Australia. The idea was both to oppose the deployment of Pershing missiles, often in a festive way, and to incarnate in everyday life a culture of feminist peace freed of oppressive relationships. While France had a few large marches in which both women and men participated, the movement never caught on as massively as among its European neighbors. And the small number of French feminists who were mobilized had a hard time making themselves heard over the rest of the feminist movement, which was becoming institutionalized.

Theorization and Institutionalization of Ecofeminism

Those actions were based on women militants' circulation and on an international network that was under construction. In 1983 the first anthology of ecofeminist texts, *Reclaim the Earth*, edited by Leonie Caldecott and Stephanie Leland, a member of Women and Life on Earth (WLOE) was published in England. The selection of texts clearly reveals the strategic intention of turning ecofeminism into an international movement. That first anthology was actually a labelling operation. It opens with an introduction defining ecofeminism, and goes on with texts from a wide range of places: an interview with the Kenyan activist Wangari Maathai, an analysis of the industrial accident in Seveso and a description of the situation in the Pacific Islands.

In addition to the peace movement, obviously, the themes developed in the book include women's health, food, and new technologies - reproductive technologies in particular - animal rights and spirituality. So we see a handful of inter-connected transnational activist women's firm determination to broaden the very definition of ecofeminism to other causes, at a time when ecofeminism seemed to be identified with the peace movement. Around the same time, German feminist academics like Maria Mies and Veronika Bennholdt-Thomsen, at the University of Bielefeld, also proposed connecting feminism, ecology and a critique of colonialism with a focus on women of the Global South and the issue of subsistence.

In the late 1980s, women's peace camps became less common as the international situation cooled off, and missiles began to be destroyed in 1987. As the social movement wound down, ecofeminist theories gained traction internationally at world conferences on women. Above all, they were reprised, deepened, institutionalized and critiqued on American and Australian campuses in the early 1990s.

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