

The deadly fires in Greece: a “tragedy” or the inevitable outcome of the criminal elites’ activities?*

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The present ecological, economic and particularly human catastrophe in Greece was neither unpredictable, nor will be unrepeatable unless some radical measures are taken and soon. Since quite a time ago and particularly in the last couple of years or so^[1], a number of specialist reports have shown the catastrophic consequences that climate change as a result of the greenhouse effect will have in the planet as a whole and the Mediterranean in particular. On the very first day of this year the prediction was made (which is well on the road to be fully confirmed) that 2007 would be the hottest year ever.^[2] A European Commission report published a few days later stressed that weather impacts were likely to include “higher temperatures, heat waves and increased dryness with the risk of drought and fires, and elsewhere increased rainfall, storms and floods. Southern Europe, including Italy and Spain, would be the region most affected”.^[3] This prediction has already been fully confirmed with Europe being split by climate. Above a line roughly running from the Pyrenees to Bulgaria, three humid months have been punctuated by violent storms and enormous cloudbursts; but to the south there has been a succession of heat waves, each more intense than the last.^[4]

The long-term solution to the ecological crisis, as I have attempted to show elsewhere,^[5] is an ecological democracy based on a radically decentralised society and economy, as an integral part of an Inclusive Democracy aiming not at the present eco-destructive growth (even if it is called “sustainable”) but, instead, at the full covering of basic human needs and those non-basic needs they choose to cover^[6] in a society of equal distribution of every form of power (economic, political and social). As it has been stressed repeatedly in this journal by Serge Latouche, Ted Trainer, myself and others^[7] the precondition for transcending the ecological crisis is the radical change in the pattern of life –a condition that is fully met by an Inclusive Democracy. However, given the catastrophic consequences of the continually worsening climatic changes, it is clear that short-term solutions are urgently required for the minimisation of these consequences. It is also clear that such solutions cannot be found in the proposals by the elites and mainstream Greens “personal steps” to be taken, like changing the electric bulbs at home etc.^[8] What is therefore urgently needed is collectively taken measures on the basis of self-organisation^[9] that should primarily be taken at the level of local communities (the *demoi* of an Inclusive Democracy). But, whenever action at the peripheral or the national level is required then, in present representative “democracy” where the elites decide on our behalf, what can be done is to force these elites through pressure from below to take the measures required. At this point, the issue of the role of the elites arises, which, through their acts and omissions, could easily be a criminal one.

In Britain, for example, where the consequences of climate change take mainly the form of floods, the government, under pressure from below, has already begun planning for a new Thames barrier to avert the risk of rising sea levels due to global warming which increases the threat of London being inundated by floodwaters. This, despite the fact that the present Thames Barrier and other flood defences would continue to protect London until 2030.^[10] Of course, this neither absolves the British political and economic elites from their significant part of the blame with respect to the world ecological crisis, nor acquits the market economy system and the consequent growth economy for their leading role as the main causes of this crisis, i.e. a crisis which continues worsening within the process of neoliberal globalisation that is decisively supported by the British elites.

In Greece, on the other hand, the consequences of climate change take mainly the form of heat waves, drought and the consequent forest fires. And yet, during the entire post-junta period since the mid 1970s when this problem gradually became acute, the political elites consisting of the leading cadres within the two main political parties which succeeded one another in power (the neoliberal New Democracy party and the social-liberal PASOK party) have done effectively nothing at all to significantly avert the threat on the Greek environment, the economy and life itself. Thus, not only did they never design an effective way of forest protection which could avert the present catastrophe, but instead, through their acts and omissions significantly contributed to it. No wonder that today, in view of the forthcoming general elections due in a fortnight, they desperately try to blame one another for the present catastrophe, or even to blame 'anarchist terrorists'. This, despite the fact that it was an anarchist intellectual who developed the project of social ecology rather than a neoliberal (or social-liberal for that matter) one! In detail, these elites:

- Not only have they never bothered to design proper forest maps, they still have not yet managed to create, in contrast to the other EU elites, a land registry, and they have also directly or indirectly supported the re-classification of land from forest land into urban land, giving a strong incentive to "developers" to build on land after it is illegally burned and cleared.
- Not only have they never planned for the appropriate investment spending for the development of a modern and well maintained electricity grid and of an ecological method of disposal of rubbish, but instead they were cutting spending by the state-owned electricity network so that it could be more easily privatised, even as they were multiplying the number of impromptu rubbish dumps. Both the badly maintained electricity grid and the rubbish dumps have played a crucial role in the initiation and spreading of forest fires now plaguing Greece.
- Not only have they never thought of creating a special fire brigade manned by specially trained personnel for dealing with forest fires—given the special needs of the country—but they were relying instead on an inadequate number of special airplanes and helicopters and the relatively untrained common firemen and even Greek youngsters doing their military service, whereas at the same time they were not renewing the contracts of part-timers trained for the specific task of extinguishing forest fires.
- Not only have they never designed systematic action plans and plans for the organised

evacuation of people under fire threat, but also they bungled the evacuation relying instead on the private initiative for it, as the US elites did with the New Orleans people. The consequence in both cases was the well-known hecatombs among poor people. In Greece an additional problem was that people seeing the state's incompetence to protect their villages from the fires were refusing to be evacuated.

In conclusion, the recent Greek fires and the consequent scores of burned people were not due to some sort of organised 'terrorist plan' by locals or foreigners as some even in the Left suggested. It was not just neoliberal policies that have to be blamed for their pursuit of drastic cuts in public spending which make any effective fire protection at the public level that much more difficult. Neoliberal globalisation is of course the main culprit but, as I showed elsewhere, this is a systemic phenomenon rather than a change in policy. It is therefore clear that behind the present catastrophe is the system of market economy itself, whose dynamic led to the present growth economy (irrespective of whether it is "sustainable" or not), i.e. an economy based on institutions of competition, instead of solidarity, and the corresponding values, as well as the elites administering this system.

* The above text is based on an article first published in the fortnightly column of Takis Fotopoulos in the mass circulation Athens daily, Eleftherotypia, on 1/9/2007.

[1] See e.g. T. Fotopoulos, "[The Myths of the Ecological Crisis](#)", *The International Journal of Inclusive Democracy*, Vol. 3, No. 2 (April 2007).

[2] Cahal Milmo, "[World faces hottest year ever, as El Niño combines with global warming](#)", *The Independent* (1/1/2007).

[3] David Gow, "[EU warns of global climate chaos](#)", *The Guardian* (11/1/2007).

[4] John Vidal and Kate Connolly, "[Southern Europe scorched as rain batters north](#)", *The Guardian* (28/7/2007).

[5] T. Fotopoulos, "[The Ecological Crisis as Part of the Present Multi-dimensional Crisis and Inclusive Democracy](#)", *The International Journal of Inclusive Democracy*, Vol. 3, No. 3 (July 2007).

[6] See T. Fotopoulos, *The Multidimensional Crisis and Inclusive Democracy* (2005) [ch. 14](#) on economic democracy.

[7] See e.g. the De-growth debate in *The International Journal of Inclusive Democracy*, [Vol. 3 - No. 1](#) (January 2007)

[8] See T. Fotopoulos, "[The price of "development" and the limitations of direct action](#)", *The International Journal of Inclusive Democracy*, Vol. 3, No. 4 (October 2007).

[9] Ibid.

[10] Ben Russell, "[Ministers plan new Thames barrier as flood risk rises](#)", *The Independent* (27/8/2007).