

Greece and the “SYRIZA Experience”: Lessons and Adaptations

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The impact of the strategic defeat of last year is still very strongly shaping various reactions within the Greek left. Some people seem content with superficial explanations of what happened and return to habitual ways of thinking and acting; others sense the strategic depth of the defeat and turn inward to disappointment and demoralization. Still others are trying to learn from the ‘SYRIZA experience’ in order to make themselves more useful to people in the future. All of us sense the dangers lurking in front of us but we are far from having a common and feasible strategy.

In a situation like this, political priorities change and ‘novel’ tasks emerge. For example, people far beyond those affiliated with the traditional left are scattered and in disarray, but also full of energy, determination and skills. What should they do? Another urgent task is how to transmit the ‘SYRIZA experience’ abroad, facilitating the left in other countries in the fight against neoliberalism and increased hostility of the elites. ‘Novel’ tasks require a different mentality and operational qualities from the ones we used to deploy through traditional political action.

But first we need: (i) a thorough understanding of the positive and negative aspects of the ‘SYRIZA experience’, and (ii) an open, bold and innovative process of arriving at the new conditions of doing politics. These are some preliminary thoughts in this direction.



The Failure

SYRIZA failed to stop austerity and neoliberal transformation in Greece. One could argue that SYRIZA also betrayed the hopes and aspirations of the popular classes and those fighting against financial despotism. It chose to remain in power, thereby ‘normalizing’ the coup we witnessed last summer and accepting neoliberal coordinates that shape governmentality today in Europe.

SYRIZA’s choice deprived the people of a crucial ‘tool’ in this fight by its painful defeat: the political representation of non-compliance with financial despotism. SYRIZA eliminated the chance of a ‘tactical withdrawal’, a collective process of reassembling our forces that could take into account the escalation of the fight provoked by elites – and forming a more

effective and resilient 'popular front' that would build its resources to challenge neoliberal orthodoxy in the future.

overnment in the months after the agreement, shows that there is no middle ground between financial despotism and democracy and dignity; if you try to reach such middle ground, you are quickly converted into an organic component of the biopolitical machine aimed at dehumanizing our societies. Arguing that the implementation of the agreement is the only way out of the present situation is just a reformulation of the neoliberal core-argument that There Is No Alternative; no strategy for continuing the fightback against financial despotism.

However, there is a danger of underestimating the brutal strategic defeat that we all suffered in 2015, hiding from ourselves the extent of our current impotence as regards any serious challenge to financial despotism. We must dare to perform an extensive reassessment of our methodology and tools if we want to be relevant in these new conditions. And to do so, we should not preoccupy ourselves with the self-evident negative nature of SYRIZA's choice and comfort ourselves that this is the source of our problems. The choice SYRIZA made is - among other things - a symptom of the deeper, structural weaknesses of the left.



Tsipras and Juncker.
CC.

Today in Greece a 'Left government' is implementing austerity, leftwing people are confused and 'The Left' is turning into a pro-memorandum political force in people's minds. Nationalists and fascists have remained the only 'natural hosts' of popular rage and resentment, the expected emotional outcomes of the burial of hope we witnessed last summer. Greeks are sensing that the future of their society is severely compromised.

The majority of Greeks have been sentenced to misery and despair through the imposition of newer harder austerity measures without any real hope for the future. If we add to the economic and social disaster that austerity is inflicting on us the huge waves of refugees that are entering Greece - especially the complex and contradictory ways in which their drama impacts on the abused psychic economy of the Greek population - and add also the fear of increased geopolitical instability in the region, then it seems certain that prosperity, stability and peace has left Greece for the identifiable future.

These are exactly the suffocating conditions that prevail in a society before it explodes - due to a random incident - deepening even further the decline, and plunging existential depths. It is like we are walking on thin ice from now on in Greece. In moments like this we have to remain calm and think clearly if we want to arrive at what is needed to adapt and to be effective.

The Sad Case of Europe



Greek Red Cross helps refugees trapped at Idomeni on the Greece-Macedonia border. Demotix/Giorgios Cristakis. All rights reserved.

The neoliberal EU and Eurozone has transferred a bundle of important policies and powers that once appeared to belong to the nat

ion state out of the reach of the people. At the same time, a vast array of neoliberal regulations and norms govern the function of the state. In the EU and Eurozone today, the elected government is no longer the major bearer of political power. In the case of Greece, democratically electing a government is like electing a junior partner in a wider government in which the lenders are the major partners.

The junior partner is not allowed to intervene and disturb decisions on such crucial economic and social issues as fiscal policy, banks, privatizations, pensions etc. If it does intervene and demand a say on these issues, then the people who appoint it are going to suffer the consequences. The elites – by extracting important powers and decisions on crucial issues from the democratically structured institutions of the bourgeois state – have managed to gain unchecked control over the basic functions of the society. It is up to their anti-democratic institutions to decide whether a society will have a functional banking system and sufficient liquidity to run or not.

That's what happened to Greece; that's the core argument of the president of Portugal behind his initial decision to appoint a pro-austerity minority government: I am preventing unnecessary pain. Pain that will be caused by the naivety and dangerous ignorance of the people and political powers that still insist on people's right to have access to crucial decisions, while at the same time they do not have the power to shape these decisions.

It is evident today that the EU is an openly anti-democratic institutional structure. The left must embrace the crude reality: in Europe a new kind of despotism is emerging fast.

The Time Lag of the Left

In western societies, the left, but not only the left, of a robust democratic constitution has been trained to do politics within the coordinates of a post-war institutional configuration. We assumed that the elites were committed to accepting the democratically shaped

mandate of an elected government. If they did not like the policies that it promoted, they had to engage in a political fight; opposition parties must convince the people that this policy is neither desirable nor successful and use the democratic processes for a new government of their preference to be elected.



Graffiti in Athens.
Photo by Carl
Packman. Used with
his permission.

But was this ever truly the case even for western societies after the Great War? This is surely a debatable issue. However, it is sufficient to assume that this was at least the dominant conception of political functioning that shaped the methodology and strategy of political agency over the last decades, even if it does not correspond fully to reality.

According to this conception, the post-war global balance of forces inscribed in state institutions a considerable amount of popular power, so that people without considerable economic power nevertheless have access to crucial decisions. Of course, the quality and the range of the access was a constant issue of class struggle. The elites were obliged to fight according to the rules (or at least to appear to do so) and at the same time they were working deliberately to diffuse a kind of institutional configuration contaminated by popular power. In recent decades (not accidentally after the fall of the Soviet Union) they made decisive steps toward diffusing this kind of power and hence limiting the ability of the popular classes to influence crucial decisions. Today the elites feel confident enough to openly defy democracy. Democracy is no longer a *sine qua non*.

Based on the premise that the framework in which politics is being performed hasn't changed significantly, SYRIZA did what the traditional way of doing politics dictates: supported social movements, built alliances, won a majority in the parliament, formed a government. We all know the results of such a strategy now. The real outcome was totally different. There was virtually no change of policy.

Prepare for Landing

A strategy that wishes to be relevant to the new conditions must take on the duty of acquiring the necessary power to run basic social functions. No matter how difficult or strange this may sound in light of the traditional ways of doing politics, it is the only way to acquire the necessary power to defy the elites' control over our societies.

Is this feasible? My hypothesis is that literally every day human activity – both intellectual and practical – is producing experiences, know-how, criteria and methods, innovations etc. that inherently contradict the parasitic logic of profit and competition. Moreover, for the first

time in our evolutionary history, we have so many embodied capacities and values from different cultures within our reach that we are bound to progress our collective intelligence in this regard if we put our minds to it.

Of course we are talking about elements that are not developed sufficiently yet. Elements that may indeed have been nurtured in liberal or apolitical contexts often functionally connected to the standard economic orthodoxy. However, the support of their further development, their gradual absorption in an alternative, coherent paradigm governed by a different logic and values, and finally their functional articulation in alternative patterns of performing the basic functions of our societies is just a short description of the duty of any left that wishes to take up a clear, systematic and strategically broadbased orientation.

Based on people's capacities, proper alignment, connection and coordination it is possible to acquire the necessary power to at least be in a position to assume the basic functions if needed. We can do this by 'extracting' the embodied capacities of the people and putting them into use for the liberation of society.

For those who are frankly skeptical of the possibility of laying the groundwork for such a process, let's see the potential in the stark case of Greece.

SYRIZA at its peak had approximately 35,000 members, the various solidarity networks included thousands of people and from experience we know that plenty of people were available to help SYRIZA with their expertise if there had been suitable processes to 'extract' their embodied capacities in an efficient way (which was not the case). Furthermore, massive unemployment provides us with huge numbers of people who would be willing to participate in networks of a different nature as long as we can build and expand processes of this kind in a systematic way. So, it is possible to pursue such a path as long as we apply the proper methodological and organizational principles in our way of doing politics.

In the worst case scenario, we will achieve some degree of resilience; people will be more empowered to defend themselves and hold their ground. In the best case, we will be able to regain the hegemony needed: people could mobilize positively, creatively and massively, even decisively to reclaim their autonomy.

Redesign the 'Operating System' of the Left

We know that the popular power once inscribed in various democratic institutions is exhausted. We do not have enough power to make the elites accept and tolerate our participation in crucial decisions. More of the same won't do it. If the ground of the battle has shifted, undermining our strategy, then it's not enough to be more competent on the shaky battleground; we need to reshape the ground. And to do that we have to expand the solution space by shifting priorities: from political representation to setting up an autonomous network of production of economic and social power (NESP).

We must modify the balance between representing people's beliefs and demands and coordinating, facilitating, connecting, supporting and nurturing people's actions. Instead of being mainly the political representative of the popular classes in a toxic anti-democratic European political environment designed to be intolerant to people's needs, we must contribute heavily to the formation of a strong 'backbone' for resilient and dynamic networks of social economy and co-operative productive activities, alternative financial

tools, local cells of self-governance, democratically functioning digital communities, community control over functions such as infrastructure facilities, energy systems and distribution networks. These are ways of gaining the degree of autonomy necessary to defy the control of elites over the basic functions of our society.

It is not only in Greece that there is a growing exclusion of people from having a job or a bank account, having a 'normal life'. Modern society in general is in decline. From history we know that societies in decline tend to react in order to survive. It is up to us to grasp this and start building networks that can perform basic social functions in a different way – one that is democratic, decentralized and based on the liberation of people's capacities. First, this would allow people who are being excluded today to survive. Second, this could begin a transition toward a better and more mature society. And last but not least, there are no empty spaces in history, so if we do not do this, the nationalists and the fascists – with their own militarized ways of performing these basic functions – may step in to conclude the decline.

Shifting the Battlefield

Our opponents have already spotted the shifting nature of the battlefield and have moved to new unclassified ways of organizing and acting. They develop new kinds of institutions (a Greek example www.corallia.org) compatible with the emerging environment of fast flows of information, digital frameworks of action and production etc. They also explore new methods and models; for example, “[open innovation](#)” models have emerged in the last few years to enable the R&D departments of big multinational companies to cope with the current distributed nature of knowledge and expertise that exceeds past means of control and usurpation of human intellectual creativity and innovation.

We have to create new popular power if we want to bring about substantial change or make ourselves resilient instead of just handling the remaining, seriously depleted if not already exhausted popular power inscribed in the traditional institutions. The question is what does it look like to do politics in order to produce popular power without presupposing traditional democratic functioning – to restore it by newly transforming it? In other words, what are the modifications needed in our political practice for the constitution and expansion of NESPs?

These modifications may be classified in three categories: political imagination, methodology and organizing principles. From my experience, the very same people who energetically claim that we need to be more innovative, better adapted and more efficient, when they actually do politics, reproduce priorities, mental pictures, methods and organizational habits that they already know are insufficient or inadequate. There are ingrained norms in terms of methodological guidelines that decisively shape the range of our collective actions, rhetoric, decisions and eventually strategy. In the same vein, we believe in and fight for the promotion of the logic of cooperation and democracy against the logic of competition, but in practice our organizations suffer severely in terms of cooperation and democracy on the operational/organizational level. We need to recognize these blind spots and set up a process of identifying best practices, methods and regulations – both from the experience of our collectivities and from expertise in management, leadership, organizational complexity and network systems theory etc. – in order to operationally upgrade our forces.

Furthermore, our actions and initiatives are not properly connected up, but fragmented and isolated, destined to face the same difficulties again and again. We need to upgrade our

operational capacities through appropriate nodes of connection, facilitating smooth flows of know-how and information, transferring best practices, building databases and accumulating knowledge and expertise in an easily retrievable and useful way. Actually, this is the advantage of multinational and large corporations in general, in comparison to others: they have a vast social network and powerful databases that gives them the necessary tools to plan and pursue their goals while their smaller competitors seem in disarray in a global environment of rapid changes. We need these qualities if we want to be really useful today.

What About Political Representation?

The function of political representation is a fundamental one in complex societies. It's the function that political parties mostly perform and that shapes everyday thinking regarding what 'politics' is about. The task here is not to revive neglected aspects of politics – like building popular power – or to reinvent collective and individual qualities; the aim is to explore novel ways of performing the function of political representation in order to upgrade significantly the political leverage of the people.

Of course, building popular power will also invigorate and possibly transform the institutional framework, giving substantial meaning back to political representation. But, the expansion of a network of the sort we are discussing here and the changes it could generate at various levels of the social configuration must be reflected on the function of political representation itself. We need to evaluate and explore concepts like the 'commons'. Advancing a project to shape political representation as 'commons' could give us valuable insights into new ways of performing vital functions that transcend the traditional, institutional framework of representative democracy.

Democratizing the State?

The left talks too much about the democratic transformation of the state. In practice, the driving concept is the restoration of state functions as they were before the neoliberal transformation. But the expansion of a network of economic and social power under people's control could unlock our imagination toward more advanced and better targeted reforms of state institutions. In theory this is an old idea: the transformation of the state is a complementary move to the self-organized collectivities of the people outside it, driven by these forms of self-governance.

Actually, this is exactly what our opponents did consistently and persistently during the last decades: they were designing and implementing reforms in various levels of state institutions based on the methods, the criteria and the functioning of their own 'social agents', namely the corporations and their own understanding of the nature of public space, namely the market. This is exactly the 'mechanics' of transformation that various intellectuals and leaders of the left described in detail a long time ago. Perhaps, by shifting our priorities we will be able to revive old but useful ideas that have been forgotten in practice.

Mind the Gap

The 'SYRIZA experience' will be worthless if we do not resist the temptation to replace one mistake with another. The failure of SYRIZA – the failure of focusing solely on traditional electoral politics to radically change the dominant neoliberal framework – creates favorable conditions for notions like 'self-referential alternativism' and 'vanguard isolationism' to

emerge and preoccupy the minds and hearts of those who are willing to continue fighting.

But choices like these just repeat what SYRIZA did, justifying fully the threat of our opponents: either you will be marginal or you will become like us! The existential threats and crucial questions regarding their future that our societies face today have nothing to do with a strategy of building 'arcs' that aim to safeguard the 'Left' or any other identity.

Entering the ominous battlefield of the twenty-first century, the left will either be relevant and useful for the defense of human societies, or it will be obsolete.



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