

The Not So Erratic Philosophy of Greece's Finance Minister Yanis Varoufakis

By [Ann Robertson](#) and [Bill Leumer](#)

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Greece's new finance minister, Yanis Varoufakis, has been mandated by the leftist Syriza government to negotiate new conditions with the "troika" (the European Commission, the European Central Bank, and the International Monetary Fund) for the continuation of Greece's desperately needed bailout. He has just written a smashing op-ed for The New York Times that forcefully outlines his government's approach to the negotiations. It deserves a standing ovation.

Currently Greece has been receiving a bailout in stages, but only on the condition that it imposes brutal austerity measures on the Greek working class and poor, including laying off state workers, lowering the minimum wage, imposing regressive taxes, and weakening labor union rights. These measures have produced what Varoufakis has called a "humanitarian crisis" in Greece with hunger spreading and many losing such basic amenities as electricity. One might think that the bailout would bring money into Greece that could then be used to help the most desperate. But in fact, the bailout money never stops in Greece; it goes directly to Greece's creditors at the expense of the Greek people. It has amounted to a massive transference of wealth from those who are struggling to get by to those who are rich. Now the troika wants even more severe austerity as a condition for continuing the bailout.

The new Syriza government has announced that enough is enough. It campaigned and won the elections on the clear platform that the austerity measures must stop, not only because of the humanitarian crisis, but they simply do not work. They have caused Greece's economy to slide into a depression. The economy has shrunk 25 percent, and unemployment has spiked to 25 percent – 50 percent for young people. More austerity will simply cause further shrinking of the Greek economy with seemingly no hope for an exit. If Syriza were to betray its mandate to stop the austerity, it would amount to political suicide because the Greek working class is prepared to fight to end austerity.

Yanis Varoufakis wrote his op-ed to assure everyone concerned, including Greece's creditors, that while the Syriza government is prepared to pay back its debts, although not on the same scale as before, it will not bend on its rejection of austerity. He put it unambiguously:

"I am often asked: What if the only way you can secure funding is to cross your red lines and accept measures that you consider to be part of the problem, rather than of its solution? Faithful to the principle that I have no right to bluff, my answer is: The lines that we have presented as red will not be crossed."

Convinced that the Europeans and Greece can find a win-win compromise where both can emerge victoriously, although creditors will suffer some form of a “haircut,” Varoufakis argued that Syriza is not motivated by some “radical-left agenda,” but invoked the German philosopher Immanuel Kant, perhaps as a sop to the Germans, to explain the Greek government’s concern for everyone’s welfare:

“One may think that this retreat from game theory is motivated by some radical-left agenda. Not so. The major influence here is Immanuel Kant, the German philosopher who taught us that the rational and the free escape the empire of expediency by doing what is right.”

Kant’s ethics were dazzling in their simplicity. His fundamental contention was that doing the right thing coincided with doing the rational thing, which was the same as acting freely, as opposed to being driven by selfish passions. For example, if we wanted to know if stealing could ever be ethically justified, Kant counseled that we pose this question: What if everyone stole? In other words, would it make sense for someone to want stealing to become a universal code of conduct? And, of course, people who steal certainly do not want others to follow their example, for they do not want to become victims of stealing themselves. Hence, they adopt a rationally flawed, self-contradictory code: everyone should abstain from stealing except them.

But Kant’s abstract ethical doctrine does not do justice to Mr. Varoufakis’ political philosophy. Elsewhere in his op-ed he put it this way:

“The great difference between this government [the new Syriza government] and previous Greek governments is twofold: We are determined to clash with mighty vested interests in order to reboot Greece and gain our partners’ trust. We are also determined not to be treated as a debt colony that should suffer what it must.”

This is not the philosophy of Kant where all are treated as equal, atomized individuals, it is the philosophy of Marx. It is raw class war. The Syriza government is out to defend the working class majority at the expense of the rich, who have been shirking on paying their taxes and are waist-deep in corruption. “No more ‘reform’ programs that target poor pensioners and family-owned pharmacies while leaving large-scale corruption untouched,” Varoufakis insisted in his op-ed. In an interview with the BBC he put it this way: “We are going to destroy the basis upon which they [the Greek oligarchy] have built, for decade after decade, a system and network that viciously sucks the energy and the economic power from everybody else in society.”

Marx argued that in class societies, there is no single ethics that can bridge class divisions. Rather, our ethical outlook is deeply defined by our class position. Many in the working class, for example, are convinced of the ethical imperative that the rich pay higher taxes, that their businesses be tightly regulated, that people who fall on hard times through no fault of their own be helped, etc. But many who are rich are equally convinced that such policies are examples of “the politics of envy” and that nothing could be more morally depraved than to transfer money from the good, hard-working wealthy people to the lazy poor.

And because this is a class war, it becomes all the more significant that leaders of major

German unions have courageously come out in opposition to their own government to support Syriza's anti-austerity platform. This is the real reason why European leaders, who represent their respective capitalist classes, refuse to budge on Greece's debt. They are perfectly aware that in war one must not display weakness; it will only embolden and strengthen "the enemy." But success also breeds success. Thanks to Syriza's electoral victory in Greece, Podemos, which also rejects austerity, has surged in Spain, as was evidenced by its recent rally in Madrid of hundreds of thousands. Any small victory of Syriza in its confrontation with its troika opponents will be a victory for Podemos and all the other anti-austerity parties throughout Europe. More European governments could possibly fall. The class struggle could intensify.

Varoufakis has described himself as an "erratic Marxist." He is far more of a Marxist than a Kantian. It's the only moral thing to be.

Ann Robertson is a Lecturer at San Francisco State University and a member of the California Faculty Association.

Bill Leumer is a member of the International Brotherhood of Teamsters, Local 853 (ret.). Both are writers for Workers Action and may be reached at sanfrancisco@workerscompass.org.

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