

The Left in Power?

Notes on Syriza's Rise, Fall, and (Possible) Second Rise¹

COSTAS DOUZINAS

The left in power? Four enticing words. The most important thing here, however, is the question mark at the end. For what does the left mean today as ideology and vision, as organization and party, as movement and government? No single or simple answer exists. We have no recipe or textbook to pick from the shelf, adjust to the Greek situation, and apply. Recent debates about Greece in the international left have been characterized by a somewhat infantile leftism, which has turned the “Grexit”—a return to the drachma and even an exit from the EU altogether—into the litmus test of radicalism. A “left-meter” has been created: anyone who does not accept the Grexit as the holy grail of left ideology is denounced as a “traitor,” “sell out,” etc. This kind of attack used to be standard fare of old Marxists and communists in the internecine struggles of the twentieth century. But the repeated theoretical failures and political defeats of the last fifty years should have taught the left that—instead of quoting Marx or repeating soothing mantras—it is more important to work out what Marx would have said today in the difficult situation of contemporary Greece and Europe.

“CONTRADICTION” IS THE NAME OF THE LEFT IN POWER

The theoretical and political uncertainties become harder when the left gets into power. Rather, when the left is elected into government. Power and government are not synonymous. The Greek power structure has hardly taken notice of the Syriza government. The first government (January–August 2015) gave at times the impression of a rabbit frozen by the powerful beams of the incoming juggernaut. The juggernaut of the Troika—the International Monetary Fund, the European Commission, the European Central Bank, and (now quadruple) the European creditors—is a powerful holy alliance. In return for loans given to Greece and other indebted countries, it has imposed neoliberal preconditions of social and economic reform. As a result, Greece finds itself in the situation of a quasi-protectorate, a country with limited sovereignty.

Ministers of the “first time left” government report that they had to act as a “government in exile.” They were held hostage to senior civil servants opposed to its (existing or feared) policies and to junior officials accustomed to minimal effort and unconcerned about efficient and effective governance. Ministers were (and still are) thwarted by public officials who believed that the Syriza government would be a short “left interval” in the long dominance by the right wing and its social-democratic partners. They were denied files and data necessary for the development of policy and they had policies that were frustrated by officials unwilling to implement them. As a result, and partly through incomplete preparation, the government concentrated too much on the negotiations

COSTAS DOUZINAS is a Member of the Hellenic Parliament, a Professor of Law and the Director of the Birkbeck Institute for the Humanities, University of London. His recent books include *The Meaning of Human Rights* (co-edited with Conor Gearty, CUP, 2014), *The Cambridge Companion to Human Rights Law* (co-edited with Conor Gearty, CUP, 2013), *Philosophy and Resistance in the Crisis: Greece and the Future of Europe* (Polity, 2013), *The Idea of Communism* (co-edited with Slavoj Žižek, Verso, 2012), and *New Critical Legal Thinking: Law and the Political* (co-edited with Matthew Stone and Illan rua Wall, Birkbeck Law Press/Routledge, 2012). Douzinas has served as an editor for *Law & Critique*, his books have been translated into thirteen languages, and he has written extensively for *The Guardian*, *OpenDemocracy*, and other global publications.

1. This is an advance chapter from a book entitled *The Left in Power*, which, however, does not discuss the refugee and immigration crisis. 850,000 people landed on the Greek islands in 2015 and hundreds drowned. This immense crisis needs a separate chapter dealing with it.

with the lenders and too little on improving the deprivations and degradations of everyday life.

But is there a “left” way of doing government? It is a difficult question not only because we don’t have an answer, but also because we don’t even have a fully worked out question. There is no precedent in Western Europe. The government must experiment, take risks, use the imagination of party and movement, particularly that of young women and men who have consistently supported it. We have to learn to swim by jumping in the water.

The left in power in the current hostile international, European and domestic environment is a project marked by a series of paradoxes and contradictions. Its central expression is this: when a radical left party takes charge of the state, it encounters a hostile institution organized to frustrate its plans. Marxist political and legal theory has considered state and law antagonistic, in both form and content, to the left. This is the basis of the claim that the law will “wither away” in communism. As a result, the relationship between institutions and the left in democratic societies has not been sufficiently explored. The closest the left has come to developing a strategy for this unprecedented condition was Nikos Poulantzas’ idea of being both inside and outside the state, taking it over as well as acting against it. “Contradiction is the name of the left in government.”

This general contradiction takes a more specific form in the Greek situation. For the right wing opposition and establishment media, it is a paradox and a scandal that Syriza Ministers *sotto voce* and the party openly and proudly proclaim their opposition to the policies they have to implement following the July 12 agreement and the neoliberal memorandum imposed on them. The party has called on people repeatedly to participate in strikes against continuing austerity and has asked its members to march alongside protesters against government policies. Perplexed opposition politicians find in this approach the final proof of Syriza’s crazy, almost schizophrenic behavior. For establishment politicians, the role of the governing party is to support its Ministers and to act as a transmission belt popularizing and legitimizing policies and distributing small-scale patronage. Yet a left party must always keep a distance from its government, criticizing its policies when they depart from their shared ideological commitments. In the current Greek situation, when the government is held hostage to hostile domestic and foreign powers, critical support and even opposition is pragmatically unavoidable and ideologically necessary.

Governing in such a situation involves resilience and compromise; it involves ideological commitment accompanied by political reversals. Party and government have to persevere in their task, losing battles but preparing for victory in the war. A commonsense view believes that contradictions prepare Syriza’s inevitable downfall. However, contradiction is not simply a debilitating condition. Being in contradiction, negotiating a way out of an *aporia*, offers a dialectical opportunity. A left government under foreign tutelage which is responsible for a society imbued with neoliberal ideology, a failing economy, and an inefficient and corrupt state has to maneuver its way out of contradiction by distinguishing between different temporalities and thematic priorities.

The political version of the paradox is somewhat different. Syriza finds itself in the strange position of a political victory pulled out of an ideological defeat.

The ultra-leftist opposition claims that Syriza has betrayed its own values, but the answer is brutally simple. People did not vote for Syriza when it was just a radical left opposition party. Before 2012, when its left ideology, rhetoric and personnel were still intact, Syriza received at most 5% in elections. In January 2015 people voted massively for Syriza (it received 37%); in the July 2015 referendum, the “No” vote received 62%, with Syriza as the only party supporting it; and in the September 2015 election Syriza again received a massive portion (36% of the vote). Three successive electoral victories in a short 9-month period is an internationally unprecedented success and cannot be attributed solely to Syriza’s leftist credentials. Electoral victory did not emerge out of, but against the ideological hegemony of the established right wing and social-democratic parties, which ruled the country for forty years. Understanding the causes and limitations of this victory and turning votes into winning hearts and souls will be the deciding factor for Syriza’s future.

A BRIEF ACCOUNT OF SYRIZA’S RISE

But I’m getting ahead of myself. How did we get here? Just before the 2012 elections, which marked the beginning of the Syriza ascent, *Forbes* magazine published an article by Bill Frezza entitled “Give the Greeks what they Deserve: Communism.”² The article argued that the world needs a new communism in action and that there is no better candidate than Greece. “Kick them out of the EU, cut the flow of free euros and then sit back comfortably and enjoy the destruction of the left for a generation.” It was the first published example of what became known as the “short left interval.” Let them get into power, make sure they fail and, *by that token, kill off the left* in Europe.

Has this succeeded? The answer is both yes and no. A postmodern *coup d’état* was put into operation immediately after the election of Syriza on 25 January 2015.³ The government was elected with a clear mandate to put an end to austerity. Between 2009, when the first bailout loan and its accompanying memorandum were *put in place*, austerity policies were carried out on two fronts: fiscal austerity and internal devaluation. Fiscal austerity was pursued through the reduction of public spending, the privatisation of key state assets, and the increase of tax revenues. Large numbers of civil servants were sacked, social services were slashed with the health service, in particular, unable to meet basic needs. The humanitarian crisis that followed is well documented. The creditors’ logic aimed at generating primary budget surpluses, which would not be used to restart the stalled economy but to repay the escalating debt. The previous governments had accepted the obligation to create annual surpluses of up to 5% of GDP in the next seven years, something that no government since Ceauşescu’s Romania has either attempted or achieved.

The internal devaluation was carried out through the repeated reduction of private sector wages and the abolition of the bulk of labour law protections, such as collective bargaining. At the same time, the repeated tax increases, including the regressive tax on real estate, meant that the bleeding of the economy reached unprecedented levels. The pauperisation of the working people, the IMF argument goes, would improve competitiveness and help economic growth. But the

2. <http://www.forbes.com/sites/billfrezza/2011/07/19/give-greece-what-it-deserves-communism/>

3. <https://www.opendemocracy.net/can-europe-make-it/costas-douzinis/very-european-coup>

result was abject economic failure. The economy shrank by 26%, unemployment jumped to 27%, youth unemployment went up to 60%, and more than 3 million people were on or below the poverty line. The IMF admitted a couple of years ago that it had under-calculated the adverse effects of austerity on the economy – the so-called fiscal multiplier – by a factor of three.

It is against this background that *in January 2015 the Greeks elected Syriza – a party committed to reversing these policies*. A period of negotiations with European institutions and creditors followed. But they were not proper negotiations. The huge gap in power between the two parties' resources and ideology made the talks brutally asymmetrical. I have called these "negotiations" a European coup, an attempt at "regime change" using banks and not tanks. The economic stakes for the lenders were and still are relatively small: the Greek economy is only 2% of European GDP, and so this does not justify the risk of a breakdown in relations, particularly after the huge migration flows of 2015 when Greece received more some 850,000 refugees and immigrants. The precautionary principle of risk theory, inscribed in the European DNA, demands that the unpredictable effects of a Grexit on the European and world economy should be avoided. If the collapse of Lehman Brothers created such a huge crisis, a Grexit was considered more dangerous.

The perceived threat of a Syriza success and of a haircut of Greek debt, repeatedly declared unsustainable by the IMF, is political, not economic. The European elites fear a *southern Europe contagion of the anti-austerity stance taken by the Greek people and government*. The Scottish anti-austerity vote, the results of the Portuguese and Spanish elections, the Sinn Fein opinion poll results, and the election of Jeremy Corbyn as leader of the British Labour party indicate that the people have started stirring. The Syriza government led the attack on the "there is no alternative" neoliberal mantra. An arc of virtue followed (moving alongside the Mediterranean and further north on the European periphery), an arc that threatens the hegemonic position. "There is another way": this is what Syriza and the left argue. Markets are not above people, democracy should be extended and deepened, public assets should not be privatized, and we must stop the massive transfer of capital from the poor to the rich.

Even a limited success story, from this point of view, would have indicated that people can fight back against the odds. The European Union and the IMF feared that the Syriza political contagion would spread across Europe. Immediately after the historic January 2015 victory, the first one for the radical left in Europe, a destabilisation plan was put into effect. The aim was clear: either overthrow the government, if it did not accept the onerous conditions imposed on Greece; or humiliate the government so much as to make it impossible to keep the party and government together. Many were the signs of this attempted "regime change." All the black arts of misinformation and pressure were put into operation. Greeks were encouraged to remove their savings so as to create a bank run. Fiscal strangulation was followed by the drip-drip of reduced bank liquidity, which reminded people of Chinese water torture. Eventually all financial loans and help were switched off and capital controls had to be imposed after the referendum was called in July.

Every time the Greek government presented a political proposal to solve the long-term problem of debt sustainability, it was asked to go to the European technocrats and have it *evaluated*. Every time Greek authorities returned with detailed *numbers*, the creditors would challenge the political framework behind it. The IMF insisted on hardening internal devaluation but asked for a debt reduction to make it viable. The Europeans were more sensitive to Syriza's democratic mandate but unwilling to negotiate the easing of debt. Caught between the Scylla of a permanently increasing debt (where new loans are used to pay the earlier debt) and the Charybdis of escalating austerity, Syriza ran out of negotiating room.

The endgame moves were characteristic of the impasse. On Thursday June 18, while Premier Alexis Tsipras was in Russia, Reuters reported a leak from a member of the ECB Board according to which the high street banks might not open the following Monday. It was a clear sign, *urging people* to withdraw their savings on Friday – a warning and self-fulfilling prophecy that could amount to a criminal offence. I was having dinner with senior Syriza members in Athens when the news broke. I was surprised and delighted by their calm, cucumber-cool response. They decided not to give much emphasis to the leak and to play down the continuing attacks. There was no bank run on Friday morning.

On June 25, Greece submitted a new set of fully *budgeted* proposals. They were a major retreat from the Syriza manifesto and went a long way towards the creditors' position. The *government* accepted fiscal demands by cutting public spending and increasing taxes, amounting to a €7.9 billion total loss to the economy. On the other hand, the new burden was distributed in a more just way. 70% of the new taxes were placed on the shoulders of the wealthier part of society by increasing the corporate tax rate from 26% to 29% and imposing a one-off tax on corporations with profits of over half a million. For the first time, these proposals were well received by the lenders, who stated that they were a valid basis for agreement. But immediately afterwards, four days before the end of the current financial programme, the lenders increased the amount, further bled the economy of over €11 billion, and reversed priorities by imposing the bulk of the new demands on the poorer part of society.

This deal was presented as a final "take it or leave it" proposal. Angela Merkel called it "generous," while Donald Tusk, the President of the European Council, said that "the game is over." It became clear that the "negotiations" would conclude only if the government accepted the blackmail and abandoned its ideology as well as its promises to the Greek people. Against this background, Tsipras called the referendum on July 5 asking the people to reject the creditors' blackmail.

The July 5 referendum was an unprecedented case of democracy in action. It combined institutional and popular, direct forms of democracy. The Syriza party machinery mobilized late and reluctantly in that amazing week. The 62% victory was won by ordinary people, many of whom adopted the "No" vote in a quiet but determined way. European politicians, including the President of the European Parliament and the British Chancellor of the Exchequer, warned the Greeks of the dire consequences of a "No" vote. The Greek media were awash

with predictions of doom and gloom if people rejected the offer. Polling organizations, negligently and perhaps fraudulently, predicted a “Yes” vote, and only on the Friday before the referendum did they switch to predicting a small victory for the “No” vote. The people, weary of the hostile media, became “Shy No Voters,” not answering pollsters or disclosing their voting intentions. People would not openly engage with me when I campaigned for the “No” in Athens, only to wink secretly a minute later, after taking precautions not to be seen. It was a case of citizens against power, one of the few occasions when a whole people hoodwinked first and then cocked a snook on its “superiors.”

After the referendum, Prime Minister Tsipras went back to Brussels hoping that the popular mandate would allow him to negotiate a better deal in return for a third bailout loan. He was faced with blackmail of unprecedented proportions. He was offered a third € 84 billion loan accompanied by a series of harsh and punitive prerequisites against the Syriza ideology and manifesto; or, alternatively, he was offered an exit from the Eurozone. Capitulation or Grexit were the two equally bad prospects on offer. It was a tragic dilemma, well known in classical Greek tragedy. Syriza could neither accept nor reject the blackmail, without jeopardizing either its political identity and ideology or the survival of country and government. It was a typical *aporia*, an inability to pass through the gaping mouth of Scylla and the aggressive claws of Charybdis. The choice was between failing the trust of the people who placed their faith in Syriza or jeopardizing their survival and livelihood. Tsipras negotiated with the European leaders for seventeen hours and eventually accepted a deal that, while much better than what was offered the previous week, was a clear continuation of the neoliberal agenda.

The choice was not between sticking to principles and a government’s duty to act responsibly. It was what every government does on a daily basis, namely a pragmatic and utilitarian calculation of likely consequences. Grexit, solidly rejected by the Greeks in repeated opinion polls, would have been catastrophic. Even its staunchest supporters agreed that its immediate *impact* would have further deteriorated the economic situation of a country that had already suffered a 25% fall in GDP, 27 % unemployment, 65% youth unemployment, and a close to 50% fall in family income. Unlike Argentina, Greece could not *foster* its recovery by exporting commodities. Its negative trade balance is dominated by the import of oil, food and pharmaceuticals, the retail price of which would have skyrocketed in the wake of the devaluation of the post-euro national currency. As Costas Lapavitsas, a dogmatic proponent of the Grexit has conceded, it is not possible to calculate in advance how long the post-Grexit recession would last. It could go up to eighteen months and would need to be mitigated by the rationing of basic commodities. Rationing heating oil, milk, meat and basic medicines, something that had last happened during the Nazi occupation, would have been the left government’s shortest suicide note. The middle class’s pots and pans protests against President Allende in Chile or the repeated attempts to oust President Chavez were chilling reminders of the limited powers of a government that has acted against entrenched class interests.

But it was even worse than that. In early May, Greek negotiators became aware that the German authorities were preparing a plan to exclude Greece

from the Eurozone. German Finance Minister Schäuble's plan, revealed during the July negotiations, had reached full operational levels. Greece would be expelled from the Eurozone, for an initial five-year period, while some financial assistance would be offered to deal with the expected humanitarian catastrophe. The government's negotiating strategy was in tatters. Not only did the Germans not fear the adverse effects of Grexit, it was their preferred solution. Here we should briefly examine the problematic Syriza negotiating strategy developed by Finance Minister Yanis Varoufakis and his team.

Varoufakis developed two lines of negotiation. The first was based on the belief that if Greece were to drag out the negotiations, first implicitly and later explicitly threatening Grexit, the Europeans would eventually relent out of worry about the implications of a possible breakup of the Eurozone for the European and world economy. It was a reasonable assumption sustained by many (mainly American) economists and think-tanks predicting an economic Armageddon if Greece left the euro. The catastrophe scenario was known to the EU and the ECB, which, unlike the Greek government, started taking defensive measures in case a Grexit happened by design or default. The failure of the Varoufakis strategy became apparent in May when Athens stayed the payment of a maturing IMF bond. The Greek press and government expected a major crash of international stock markets and a worsening of the credit rating of vulnerable countries such as Spain, Portugal and Italy. However, the quantitative easing introduced by Mario Draghi, the head of the ECB, as part of a series of fire-prevention measures, meant that the fears of the financial markets were contained.

This however did not change the Greek strategy. Varoufakis had played for time following the standard line of resistance to superior forces preached by Clausewitz and practiced by guerilla movements. But after the banks raised their defense lines, time started to work against Greece. The existing agreement between the Greek state and its creditors was going to run out at the end of June, allowing the ECB to stop the financial drip that was keeping banks afloat. Varoufakis continued the chicken game, not appreciating that the goalposts had been moved. When it became clear that Wolfgang Schäuble had developed a strategy of excluding Greece from the Eurozone, Varoufakis' main chip in the poker game with the Europeans was stolen by the opposition, and it turned into a powerful weapon against Greece.

This serious miscalculation was made possible by the negotiators' inexperience and was aided by a second mistake. The left always aims to carry out a concrete analysis of the concrete situation, taking full notice of the balance of forces. Cosmopolitans, on the other hand, believe that good arguments, reasoned positions, and the enlightenment values of democracy and solidarity can carry the day against materially superior opponents and the explicit political and ideological interests of neoliberal orthodoxy. We can call this the Habermasian illusion, the belief that an ideal speech-like situation exists in international politics and will allow reason and goodwill to prevail. The stakes were (and still are) huge for Greece but not insignificant for the dominant powers. Syriza's victory had opened the possibility of anti-austerity sentiment taking hold in other southern states. The dream of Spain, Portugal or Italy going left was the stuff of German and Dutch nightmares. The Greeks had to be stopped for political

rather than economic reasons, for the left contagion had to be contained in the eastern Mediterranean. The capitulation of Cyprus under a nominally communist government was seen as the model for disciplining Greece, too.

But this was lost to the Varoufakis team. Like all negotiating positions relying exclusively on good arguments, values and principles, this strategy was doomed to fail. The overwhelming anti-left forces, the miscalculation of the Europeans' fear of Syriza's success, and liberal naiveté combined with the lack of alternative strategies, led to defeat. But the referendum changed the political game, if not the negotiations.

The referendum call and the overwhelming "No" victory brought Syriza, the government and Prime Minister Tsipras, who called it against the odds, closer to the people than at any point in recent Greek history. After the referendum and despite the defeat when the third neoliberal memorandum was imposed on the government, leading to a split in the party, Syriza's electoral victory was assured. The opposition and pollsters misread the link that such a strong vote across party, ideological and class lines creates between a leader and the people. The blackmail and the resulting defeat in the July negotiations was undoubtedly inflicted in order to make the Greeks consider Syriza traitors and turncoats at worse or hypocrites at best. It was part of the "Get Tsipras" left interval strategy. This was finally put to rest in the September elections when Syriza received almost the same percentage in the popular vote as in the triumphant January elections.

DEFEAT INTO VICTORY

There is no doubt that the third memorandum, which Syriza MPs helped vote into law, involves a set of recessionary and socially unjust measures. While the July agreement is better than what was presented to Tsipras in June (since it reduced the burden on the economy by € 20 billion), there is no doubt that the Syriza government lost. Yet, the claim that the left interval was finished, that Syriza "betrayed," "sold out" or was co-opted into the neoliberal orthodoxy is absurd. The question remains, however: after the September elections, is the Syriza government still on the radical left? I experience a huge existential difficulty when voting for measures that I campaigned against in print and action. But only time will tell whether the blackmail turned Syriza to the right, *or just forced the party into a temporary retreat*. Let me repeat: we don't have a textbook definition of what "radical left" means in the 21st century and, likewise, what "left governmentality" is all about.

Syriza needs to experiment by using popular imagination and taking risks in order to develop a programme predicated on authentic left values. But this is not enough. The government must try to reform a dysfunctional, ineffective, ideologically hostile and often corrupt state sector. At the same time, it must re-energize the social movements that brought it to power and facilitate a dormant social dynamic. People have repeatedly voted for Syriza, but electoral domination does not entail ideological hegemony. On the contrary, neoliberalism has undermined communities and atomized society. Planning for a socialist future is a conundrum that could tax the brightest minds and the fieriest of hearts. And we have to deal with it here and now.

Syriza needs to turn defeat into victory, as Athena Athanasiou has noted.⁴ We have to assume defeat in the battle but prepare for the long war. Slavoj Žižek has argued that “the true courage is not to imagine an alternative, but to accept the consequences of the fact that there is no clearly discernible alternative: the dream of an alternative is a sign of theoretical cowardice, it functions as a fetish which prevents us thinking to the end the deadlock of our predicament.”⁵ This is a necessary first step. However, the contradiction between Syriza’s ideology and the neoliberal memorandum does not necessarily lead to stasis and surrender. The measures implementing the agreement are the material recognition of defeat. But contradiction is the engine room of political dialectics.

Let me start with the party. It must continue its principled and reasoned opposition to neoliberalism, take a friendly but critical distance from the government and keep pushing it to adopt at the earliest opportunity the Keynesian measures necessary for re-starting the economy. As far as the government is concerned, it must expedite negotiations with creditors about the reduction of the unsustainable debt burden. The denunciation of the imposed policies by Ministers manifests the contradictory and agonistic nature of left governmentality in a capitalist society, as Stathis Gourgouris has rightly noted.⁶ Nothing is more radical and scandalous than a government that proclaims its disagreement with the policies it has to implement, calls them the result of blackmail and develops a parallel programme to mitigate their consequences. Left governmentality means that critical distance, internal dissent and even active resistance form part of the government’s negotiating strategy and the necessary correction to the seesaw between rupture and assimilation. Let me repeat: contradiction is the name of a left government that swims in a sea of neoliberal capitalism.

POLITICAL TEMPORALITIES

A common press comment is that political time has been “dense” because of the continuously unfolding dramatic events. But time has also been elongated. In late January 2016, when the first anniversary of the 2015 election victory was celebrated, memories had already started fading. Many felt that 2015 was a year that lasted for ten. If we follow the logic of contracted or extended temporalities, 2015 was the longest, most fascinating, and toughest year of our lives. Time fast or slow, long or dense, constitutes the dimension in which the left wager will be won or lost.

Political and personal time is not united or uniform. It is multidimensional and fragmented. Syriza radicals, Members of Parliament and of the government live simultaneously in three different temporalities, three concentric circles, which are both overlapping and conflicting. The inner and shortest circle is the time of the present, the time of a left government that, as a result of the July agreement, has to legislate and apply the recessionary and socially unjust measures it ideologically rejects. It is a “dense” and difficult time for those asked to implement what they fought against. It covers the period from the September 2015 elections to April 2016 when the left is held hostage to the creditors and the country is a quasi-protectorate of the Europeans and the IMF.

It is a time of political panic and personal hysteria. The media are full of conspiracies to unseat the government, full of intrigue and apostasy, full

4. <https://www.opendemocracy.net/can-europe-make-it/athena-athanasiou/performative-dialectics-of-defeat-europe-and-european-left-after>

5. <http://www.newstatesman.com/world-affairs/2015/07/slavoj-i-ek-greece-courage-hopelessness>

6. <https://www.opendemocracy.net/can-europe-make-it/stathis-gourgouris/syriza-problem-radical-democracy-and-left-governmentality-in-g>

of impending doom and catastrophe. A fake state of emergency is constructed with Ministers and other leftists being targeted for nepotism, tax evasion and all kinds of misdemeanour and sin. The bombardment is relentless. Instant gratification, the demand of children to immediate satisfaction, has become instant catastrophe, a political infantilism that functions through the multiplication of false rumours and unfounded attacks aimed at overthrowing the government. Right wing politicians – assisted by some extra-parliamentary leftists – project their own failure on their opponents, unconcerned about the damage they inflict on politics and the international position of the country. When the latest accusation is proved a lie, then a retraction in small print covers the legal back of the defamers and the target moves to the next victim.

The strategy is clear. Government, party and movement are at their weakest in early 2016. The legislation of the necessary reform of the pension system, and the taxation of farmers who have not paid taxes in the past, have created a febrile atmosphere. The opposition hopes that the parliamentary majority of three can be undone. Syriza MPs, on the other hand, experience grave existential issues and problems of conscience. If the resilience of Syriza MPs holds and the government passes successfully through the Easter break, its survival is secure. Six months or ten years in government is the stake for Syriza.

The existential dilemma cannot go away. But it can be soothed through the activation of two other temporalities that exist as traces of futurity in the present time. The second time is slower and longer. It is the time of the “parallel” program put together by the government to mitigate the effects of the memorandum. It is the period of the development of policies with a clear left direction. Some have been introduced already while others are still being developed. They include giving citizenship to immigrants, introducing gay and lesbian partnerships, ending the persecution of conscientious objectors and draft dodgers, introducing reciprocal evaluation of civil servants, and legislating a host of economic policies that support the unemployed and poorer parts of the population. Left governmentality involves planning carefully and preparing state reforms, but also improvising and adjusting, becoming at once brutally pragmatic and uncompromisingly principled. Policies should be developed in close contact with the party and the social movements and be backed by scientific research. Because Syriza is a political government it must garner as much technocratic support as possible.

This is a medium-term plan of three to five years. It is a dialectical synthesis *purported to defend and protect* the weak through the gradual reduction of inequalities and the expansion and deepening of democracy. In its first phase, the programme continues and extends policies introduced earlier to tackle the humanitarian crisis. To be sure, the challenge of *unexpected events* always lurks, the contingency and unpredictability of what may happen.

Finally, the time of the radical left vision is the longest. It began in January 2015 and extends into the current horizon. Its weak traces, manifest in the now, operate in and against the imposed policies. It is the time of the ideal, of a socialist vision that has begun but has no visible or predictable ending. It is the longest and slowest time of a programme that must constantly mobilize popular approval and legitimacy.

The memorandum is the symbolic *order* of Syriza. It distributes government, MPs and party into their current positions of unwilling small-scale agents of European capital. The social transformation programme, on the other hand, is the imaginary order. It allows us to keep going by believing and acting now in the name of a “not yet” or a “to come,” which re-defines our current predicament as the necessary precursor of a socialist future. Syriza needs resilience and endurance as the three temporalities progress with different velocities and the three programmes come into conflict. Syriza will reach the second temporality of left governance and the third of left vision only by continuously and simultaneously implementing and undermining the agreement policies. Only when this third temporality starts unfolding, freed from the neoliberal lambast, will the full programme of the left of the 21st century emerge. It is a case of escaping into the future, acting now from the perspective of a future perfect, of what will have been. In this sense, the future becomes an active factor of our present.

DEMOCRATIC SOCIALISM IN THE 21ST CENTURY

Is Syriza ready? Can it succeed? There are acts you prepare for and others that hit you on the head, like a miracle or an earthquake. You are never ready to fall in love or to start a revolution. The decision, the act, hits you on the head: the French call it *coup de foudre*; in English you *fall* in love. The act is like madness, it calls you to arms, you cannot resist, it takes over. Syriza has been adopted by the people as the subject of radical change and it can only accept the challenge. It is a historic wager; its outcome is not a given.

For Marx, communism appears historically as a political movement or as an idea; let us call it the communist horizon that transcends and politicizes its own historical expressions, abandoning the teleological trajectory. This idea interpellates subjects, over-determines social relations, and promises a radical humanism that brings people together as well as people and nature. Syriza’s long-term social transformation aims to achieve the democratic socialism of the 21st century. Party and government policies, in the present hard times, in the time of left governmentality, and in the ever-present time of the left vision are a continuous journey sailing towards the horizon of equality and democracy. We can call the idea *isodemocracy*, paraphrasing and developing Etienne Balibar’s *equaliberty*.

As a horizon, *isodemocracy* is a dividing line, an arc that moves back and away as we approach it. This is not the case because *isodemocracy* is a future utopia, a non-realizable ideal. A horizon remains open and unreachable but is integrated as a guiding lighthouse beam into our everyday practice. It is a kind of regulative idea. Every application or instantiation opens up to further extension and deepening, changing both strategic task and political subject. *Isodemocracy* is therefore not a telos, a terminal station, or the purpose and end of historical teleology or entelechy. We will not cry out at some point, “here we are, we’ve reached the horizon, we have succeeded.” On the contrary, the horizon exists here and now, embodied in every relationship and in every struggle, in every victory but also in our defeats. We failed, we will try again, we will fail better next time. Because we failed better we are now on the threshold of success.

If horizon is the form, its content is double: equality and democracy. First, there is the axiom of equality and the struggle for the reduction of inequality. While freedom is open to all kinds of incompatible interpretations (such as freedom of choice, to turn yourself into a small capitalist business) the foundation of the equality claim is simple. Everyone counts for one and no one more than for one. A left government concretizes this axiom and makes it operational. Deepening equality leads also to freedom as existential autonomy. There is no freedom without equality and no equality without freedom.

Second, there is democracy. Neoliberalism subjects politics to economics, government to governance, democratic debate and agonism to scientific truths. Market preferences are imposed on people and governments turn into collection agencies for the markets and the banks. Democracy becomes impoverished and representative institutions become anemic servants of greedy capitalism. In this context, *isodemocracy* means the re-politicization of politics and the democratization of society. The left proposes the introduction of referenda, the possibility of the recall of MPs and other elected positions, and gender and race quotas. But when we succeed with these institutional reforms, we will discover that formal democratization is not enough. It must move from formal method to a form of life; in other words, it must pass from central politics to economic, social, cultural and personal life. Democracy, too, is a horizon that keeps changing as we approach it. The general principle becomes concretized and transformed, the horizon takes on the colors and tints of the rainbow, a deeper hue and a wider spectrum. We move from strengthening a principle that has been hollowed out to the recognition that the principle itself has limited reach. It needs to be universalized and deepened in order to succeed. Democracy thus extends from the central political stage and a method of vote aggregation into everyday life. In this process of extension and deepening, institutional democracy is supplemented by direct and non-representative forms. Services and powers are gradually subtracted from state power and transferred to the deliberations and decision making of citizens. This would be the contemporary meaning of the withering away of the state.

The radical left party can meet this historic mission if its form is flexible, its borders porous, its internal life fully transparent. A party becomes a collective intellectual when it abandons the security of routine activity and becomes a lab for the experimentation of structures, ideals and methods. Values and tasks succeed if accompanied by pragmatism as to the means. The party needs unwavering loyalty to equality; democracy and flexible pragmatism are its tools. Take social policies. A task is set: say, ending the humanitarian crisis. *If it is achieved, this first success leads immediately to the next step. The equality axiom gives shape to new policies that gradually close the gap and introduce those who escape the poverty trap into the realm of left ideas.* Every demand, every success, becomes a step in a long march and a precondition for the next, more radical task. The horizon moves away and again gives the direction for the following chapter, for a deeper radicalization. In this struggle, both the task and the subject keep changing, transforming itself along the way. Stasis and immobility, on the other hand, lead inexorably to reintegration within the old regime. And the same goes for the

rule of law. The introduction of a modern rule of law state is a radical demand and a prerequisite for democratic socialism. The demand that the legal system delivers on its promises, that existing rights and entitlements are enforced, is a minimal requirement. But immediately afterwards, we will discover that to perform basic promises, the law must move from proceduralism and individualized rights to substantive equality. This way, equality and democracy become deeper and richer and *isodemocracy* operates as the dialectical method of reality.

The future of Europe is currently being played out in Greece. It is either the catastrophe of neoliberalism, austerity and the post-democratic condition, or the first major victory of resistance. It will show that resistance and struggle can win, that victory is not a utopian dream. This struggle involves both the ballot box and the street. There can be no left government without social mobilization, and there can be no lasting victories for the solidarity campaigns and the social movements without a change of government.

Socialism, radical change, is nothing more than *insistence and perseverance* with regard to our initial decision to commit ourselves to the axiom of equality and democracy. From the perspective of the future, our original commitment will appear well founded and foundational, although in reality it is as much necessary as it is contingent. This is how a great love affair and a revolution happen. After the fact, they are considered necessary, predetermined, and indispensable. But if you get to the “*rendez vous*” a few minutes late, or if you *delegate* the change to others, to politicians, experts or insiders, then *what was* predestined *has become* a lost chance, a love affair you *will* never experience. It is our political and moral duty to meet the object of our desire.

Will Syriza help change the dominant paradigm in Greece and Europe? Its victory has just put a crack into the dominant model. A paradigm shift can happen if people in London, Paris, Madrid and Rome realise that the dominant model has failed and must be replaced, root and branch, by a new model. Europe will have to choose between the disasters of austerity and the hope of new community. The signs are optimistic.

RECOMMENDED CITATION

Douzinis, Costas. “The Left in Power? Notes on Syriza’s Rise, Fall, and (Possible) Second Rise.” *Near Futures Online* 1 “Europe at a Crossroads” (March 2016): <http://nearfuturesonline.org/the-left-in-power-notes-on-syrizas-rise-fall-and-possible-second-rise/>