

Greece: Turning “No” Into a Political Front. Some lessons from Syriza — and where we go from here

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All those who vested hopes in the prospects of a Syriza government still find themselves today in a state of “post-traumatic shock,” as Seraphim Seferiades aptly put it. The shock is attributable firstly to the defeat of a specific political strategy, but the extent of this defeat and its shattering character is something whose effects extend well beyond the people committed, one way or another, to that strategy.

As a member of Syriza’s central committee for the last three years, I too bear part of that collective responsibility. Of course, we are not all the same in Syriza. As a member of the Left Platform, over the past five years I was among those making consistent interventions around questions such as the euro, seeing the disaster that would ensue if another course was not taken.

But it would be facile to assert that what has happened does not concern me. The majority line in Syriza led to a debacle, but those of us in the minority for our part were not able to forestall it, however much events vindicated our perspective.

Notwithstanding all this, I am not participating in this discussion with any inclination for self-flagellation, not only because that would not be helpful, but because such a stance offers an easy way out, a way of escape from the political substance of the problem.

Those of us who have accepted such responsibilities, each in our own way, should now try to contribute to a collective investigation into what we can do together from this point onward, and not simply lay down our arms.

Here are my thoughts along these lines, organized in three points. The first is about what exactly was defeated in this defeat. The second, as paradoxical as it may seem, is about what was not defeated — what remains and has a potential for use in the future. And the third, of course, is what is to be done now.

What Was Defeated?

It is never self-evident in a defeat, and particularly in a great defeat of historic dimensions, to determine exactly what was defeated. The most characteristic example is that of the fall of the Soviet Union and the Eastern Bloc. Even today there is still no agreement as to what was defeated

with the collapse of those regimes.

Most still think that what was defeated together with the USSR was communism, socialism, revolution, the possibility of social liberation. Those of us who disagree with that are a minority, but that does not necessarily mean that we are wrong. But it certainly means that we have not yet emerged from that defeat.

The jury is still out, then, on what was defeated, and I am under no illusion that what I am going to say now can count on any kind of wider acceptance. It's quite the opposite actually. It seems logical, however, to start from what in my view is the least controversial point. What has been crushingly defeated was a political strategy, the strategy that the majority in Syriza, and therefore Syriza as such, has espoused for the last five years, and which could be called "left-Europeanism."

It was the conception that the memoranda and austerity could be overturned within the specific framework of the eurozone, and, more broadly, of the European Union (EU). That we have no need of an alternative plan because in the final analysis a positive solution will be found within the euro and that displaying credentials as "good European citizens" and professions of faith in the euro could be used as bargaining chips.

I think that it has been exhaustively demonstrated over the last months that nothing of this kind is possible. It has been exhaustively demonstrated exactly because it was attempted by a political subject who believed to the end in this possibility, who bent over backwards to work within that particular framework and doggedly refused to examine any other.

For this reason, talk of "betrayal" and of "the traitor Tsipras," although rooted in an understandable emotion — it is obvious that someone might feel betrayed when in a week's time a 62 percent "no" becomes a "yes" — does not help us understand what has happened.

Alexis Tsipras, the Greek prime minister, did not carry out a secret plan "to sell out." He found himself confronted by the total bankruptcy of a specific strategy, and when a political strategy fails this means that there remains only the choice between bad and worse options. Or rather, there remains only the worst option — and that is exactly what happened in this case.

So the left-Europeanism approach, the axis around which debate was centered, both in Syriza and in the European left generally, and in which both the conflicts of the time and the limits of Syriza itself were reflected, suffered an ignominious defeat. Within those general parameters there are, however, a number of other factors that warrant attention.

The first is that the left-Europeanism strategy naturally meant largely sidestepping the dynamic of popular mobilization. The choice of focusing on negotiations with the troika with a view to reaching a mutually acceptable solution quickly led to the first great failure, namely the February 20 agreement signed between the Greek government and the Eurogroup.

This agreement didn't just tie the hands of the Syriza government, opening the way for the capitulation that followed. Its first and most immediate consequence was to paralyze the mobilization and destroy the optimism and militancy that prevailed in the first weeks after the January 25 electoral victory.

Of course, this downgrading of popular mobilization is not something that started on January 25 or February 20, as a consequence of a particular governmental tactic. It is something that was preexistent in Syriza's strategy. It is something that accompanied the retreat of the great mass mobilizations of the first two years of the "shock therapy" period (2010-12), a retreat with its own causes, subjective and, more significantly, objective.

Nevertheless, adaptation to these conditions, to the retreat of the mass movement, was a matter of political choice for the Syriza leadership. From a certain moment onwards its own shift to ever more “moderate” positions, the passage from “no sacrifice to the euro” and “the euro is not a fetish” — slogans that were heard even as late as the run-up to the 2012 elections — to “we are not going to leave the euro; they will accept what we say and that will be as clear as daylight” intensified and reproduced the retreat.

The second point of strategy that was defeated was the logic of appeasement that prevailed on the “internal front” once Syriza assumed governmental responsibilities. There are a few aspects to this logic.

The first is that a specific choice was made in favor of an alliance with the traditional political personnel. This is evidenced by the selection of New Democracy’s Prokopis Pavlopoulos to be president of the republic — not to mention other equally weighty preferences, such as the choice of Lambis Tagmatarchis, a journalist entirely integrated in the dominant media system, for director of the reconstituted public broadcasting company, a position in no way related to the constraints of the negotiations and the conflict with the creditors.

The second aspect of appeasement, even more profound, is the logic of conflict avoidance and continuity in the mechanism of the deep state and the bourgeois state apparatus. Two examples will suffice to illustrate this aspect: the appointment of Panos Kammenos, the leader of the ANEL party, to take charge of defense and foreign policy, irrespective of the counterweight provided by the presence of Costas Isychos, a Left Platform vice minister, in the defense ministry (but with a limited brief).

The role of the minister of defense became evident: for example, in the continuation of military collaboration between Greece and Israel — though it would be wrong to imagine that Kammenos alone bears all the responsibility for this. The other example, of course, is that which is symbolized by the placement of Yannis Panousis, a typical “law-and-order” politician from a Pasok background, as the minister of public order, and now, indeed, with extended powers. This is a case of a clear choice in favor of continuity at the level of the repressive mechanisms of the state, with obvious repercussions for the overall political and class balance of forces.

The third aspect: the appeasement of the center of economic power, the oligarchy, and what is called in Greek “diaploki,” the intricate nexus between business interests, politicians, and the state. And here we must be absolutely specific. It would of course be a mistake to attach all blame to individual persons. But we should be quite clear about the fact that there have been enclaves providing bridges with sectors of the oligarchy inside Syriza, even before it came to power.

There is nothing coincidental about the exceptionally opaque role of the vice prime minister, Giannis Dragasakis, as the person par excellence devoted to keeping the status quo untouched in the entire banking and financial sector, standing as a barricade against any attempted change in a system that today forms the nerve center, the literal heart, of capitalist power in its relation to the state.

The final element in the failure of Syriza’s strategy was its conception of the party and the evolution of the party form itself — which is entirely consistent with everything that has been said above. Even before assuming office Syriza had tended to become less and less democratic as a party, not in the superficial sense of the term — being permitted to express one’s opinion — but in the sense that its members had less and less influence on the shaping of policy and on where decisions were being taken within the party.

What we saw being constructed after June 2012 — step by step but systematically — was a party

form increasingly leader-centered, centralized, and detached from the actions and the will of the membership. The process went entirely out of control when Syriza went into government. From that time on, the high circles of the government and the key centers of political decision-making acquired absolute autonomy from the party.

One need merely mention that the central committee has only been convened three times since Syriza came to power. This consummated the downgrading of the party as a space for political debate and elaboration, and the stratification of its internal structure.

What Was Not Defeated?

For the thoughts that follow I have drawn inspiration from a text by the East German Communist writer Christa Wolf, written before the fall of the German Democratic Republic but published afterwards, under the title *Was bleibt* (What remains, what is left to us).

It is a very significant work that in my view is attempting to say the following: the strictest self-criticism should not end up demolishing what was an important collective endeavor. But that is not all: the quest for the fragments of truth that were inherent, amid contradictions, in that unfinished endeavor acquires particular significance in conditions of defeat, for it highlights the way that, even if they were not realized, there are always other potentials within a historical bet.

History is never written in advance: its trajectory always goes through points of bifurcation in which one direction finally prevails over an alternative one.

So, what has not been defeated in Syriza? In other words what is there that has been positive in this experience for the Left and the workers movement?

As a first approximation I would make the following four points, which could also prove useful for the future reconstruction of the radical left and the reformulation of a present-day anticapitalist strategy.

For starters, the argument that a unitary government of radical left forces is a necessary and tested instrument for approaching the question of power has been validated. Of course, “approaching the question of power” doesn’t mean resolving it. It is obviously one thing to be the government and quite another to have power. The question is whether we are able to use the first to achieve the second, and if so how.

Whether, that is to say, the achievement of governmental office through a combination of electoral successes and mass struggles can be utilized as a point of departure for a “war of position” strategy, i.e. for the development of popular mobilizations to open up a space for overturning the overall balance of class forces.

This approach has been tested so far only in Latin America. We now have a case in one of the main centers of the world capitalist system, Europe, which at least indicates that it is possible for a minority force of the radical left to build an electorally successful alternative in a situation of deep social and political upheaval and get into government.

The limit of this comparison lies of course in the fact that, as a relatively autonomous imperialist center, Europe is dominated by a very particular political construction, the EU, which increasingly acts as the collective hegemon of European capitalisms, posing thus all sorts of constraints and obstacles that are only partly similar to the domination exercised by the United States in their

“backyard.”

Second element: the transitional program. The idea of the transitional program is that we do not content ourselves with abstract, propagandistic anticapitalist discourse that is applicable in every situation and simply reiterates the strategic objective of socialism and revolutionary overthrow.

The tried and tested dividing lines, those that enable the offensive against the class enemy to be activated effectively and the overall balance of forces to be overturned, must be defined anew for every specific occasion.

Here too the anti-memorandum goal was, in my opinion, very properly the central axis of this transitional program — on the condition, of course, which was not observed, that a consistent anti-memorandum line would lead inevitably to an across-the-board clash with the eurozone and with the EU itself.

Whatever its limitations, particularly in relation to the calculation of its net budgetary impact, the so-called “Thessaloniki Program,” [\[1\]](#) on the basis of which Syriza won the popular mandate last January, was an incomplete but basically sound approximation to such a program. There is nothing coincidental about the way that it came so soon into conflict with the line being followed by the government, to the point where it rapidly became taboo to mention it within the ranks of the government, and to some extent also within the party.

The transitional program is also organically linked — this is something we learn from the inheritance of the third and fourth congresses of the Communist International and the subsequent elaboration by Gramsci and Togliatti — to the goal of the united front, the rallying of all the forces of the block of the subordinated classes at a higher political and strategic level. It was this unifying approach implicit in the idea of a “government of the anti-austerity left” that fired the imagination of broad masses in spring 2012, enabling Syriza’s rise.

The reason for this was that the goal of a “government of the anti-austerity left” was not just a “Syriza government,” and still less was it the Syriza-ANEL government that finally emerged. It was a way of reconstructing the popular movement itself, along with its social references and political forms of expressions.

But as we know, the goal came up against two obstacles, resulting in an extremely problematic and inherently contradictory implementation of it after January 25. One factor was its rejection from the remainder of forces on the radical left (KKE and Antarsya), which proved unable to respond to the key issue of that moment. Another was an impasse marking the limits of Syriza strategy, particularly after the turn to “moderation” and subsequent cave-in after June 2012.

The above leads me to the fourth and final remark on “what remains” from this experience — the relationship between the social and the political. What we have seen over these past five memorandum years is that the conflicts unfolding in the course of the class confrontation are brought together and called on to resolution at the political level. From a certain point onwards, success or victory, even partial victory, is played out at the political level and becomes a condition for popular mobilization to develop to a higher level.

This was precisely the gamble that was launched in 2012 and after, with all its contradictions and limitations. That is to say the combination of a left government and of a rich record of popular struggles, which of course can never be taken for granted and must continually be reasserted, so as to open up a perspective of radical social change.

One should insist on that last point. What has been played out in Greece has been no run-of-the-mill

alternation in power of parties with a history of system management. It has not been something like the election of François Hollande in 2012, or like the “center-left experiment” of Romano Prodi in Italy in the 2000 years. It is not even like the case of François Mitterrand in 1981, who came to power with a quite radical program by the standards of the time.

The bet played out in Greece has been different, carrying a powerful anti-systemic potential, and it exactly for that reason triggered a crisis not only in Greece but internationally. It was a showdown on a large scale in which our side proved itself entirely incapable not only of winning but even of organizing elementary self-defense, so that we were led to the capitulation we have seen.

What Now Should We Do?

At this moment, as I said earlier, Greek society at large is still in a state of post-traumatic shock. Our camp has been stunned by the reversal of the dynamic sparked by the thunderous “no” of the referendum, all within the space of a few days. When we move outside of the activist circles and the more politicized layers of society, we see that contradictory feelings are prevalent. There is a mixture of disillusion, anger, and profound unease about what is to come, but also a margin of tolerance of the choice that has been made by the government and by Tsipras himself.

The nodal point for recovering from this climate and for a restart is the following one: the 62 percent for “no” is at the moment deprived of any structured expression. Its political consolidation and articulation is the number one immediate task for all of us. This political consolidation cannot be viewed as the linear extension of any existing formations — neither Syriza nor Antarsya nor other formations or sections of those groups.

We should now speak in terms of a new political project. A new political project that will be class-based, democratic, and anti-Europeanist, and in a first phase will take the form of a front, open to experimentation and to new organizational practices. A front that will bring together moves from above and initiatives from below — similar to those that sprang up during the struggle around the referendum with the creation of the “committees for the No,” but also afterwards.

At this moment it is difficult, if not impossible, to say more about the concrete form that this political project might assume. It is obviously contingent to a decisive extent on the internal struggle we are currently waging inside Syriza, alongside the comrades of the Left Platform and others. We all realize that for this project to be able to go forward much else is needed.

Under no circumstances should the left wing of Syriza, and more specifically the Left Platform, which is its best organized component, be encouraged to claim some exclusive status. It nevertheless has a central role to play, as is now being widely recognized by friend and foe alike. And this in a sense, perhaps, is among the most significant gains of the past weeks.

As regards its goals, as they were recently summarized in a fine article by Eleni Portaliou, my comrade of many years, the undertaking is centered on the following basic axes:

- The liberation of the country, and the Greek people, from the shackles of the eurozone, with immediate elaboration of a plan for exit from the memoranda and euro and across-the-board confrontation with the EU that, in my own view, should go as far as withdrawal.
- The reconstruction of this ruined country — of its economy, of its state, and of its social fabric — headed by the working classes and the popular bloc, who are called on to lead this process.

- This project is profoundly class-based. It will be grounded in the leading sectors of the working class who voted “no” and rejected austerity by more than 70 percent in the referendum of July 5, and its backbone will be constituted by forces coming from the best traditions of the workers and of the revolutionary movement in their multiple expressions.
- At the same time it is also national. And here of course more explanation is needed.

As I understand it, the term “national” has two aspects to it.

The first is the “national-popular” in the Gramscian sense — that the laboring masses must emerge as the leading force in society, that they must become “the nation” in order to reorient that “nation” in a different direction.

As Marx and Engels phrase it in the *Communist Manifesto*, “since the proletariat must first of all acquire political supremacy, must rise to be the leading class of the nation, must constitute itself the nation, it is so far itself national, though not in the bourgeois sense of the word.” “National” here doesn’t mean, therefore, some “popular frontist” conception of trans-class unity with some spectral “national bourgeoisie,” or with some of its sectors. It refers to the hegemonic dimension of any class-centered project aimed at winning political supremacy.

Also, far from leading to any retreat to national narrowness, or to nationalism, this “nationalization” of the new hegemonic bloc, as I will explain in a moment, also means embodying a profound new internationalism.

The project is also national in the sense that at this moment there is a problem of national sovereignty in Greece — that is to say, of the existence of popular sovereignty and of democracy itself. The new agreement that has been signed by the Greek government doesn’t simply perpetuate troika rule, it deepens it. We are now in a situation where the Greek state and any elected Greek government essentially do not have in their hands a single lever to exercise any policy at all.

This is perhaps the deeper objective of the memorandum, above and beyond the imposition of yet another package of barbarous austerity measures.

The secretariat for inland revenue, detached from the rest of the cabinet and placed under the control of the troika, has acquired total autonomy from the government. A financial council is being established that will be able to automatically institute horizontal cuts if there is divergence from any fiscal objective set in the memorandum. The infamous €50 billion fund is also being created under the direct control of the troika, and all Greek public property earmarked for privatization is being brought under its jurisdiction.

Even EL.STAT, Greece’s statistical service, is being transformed into an ostensibly independent authority that will be controlled directly by the troika and will serve as a mechanism for policing and checking, on a daily basis, on the Greek state’s implementation of memorandum goals.

Greece is thus being converted — I go so far as to draw this analogy — into a kind of Kosovo writ large, a country bound hand and foot in neocolonial chains and consigned to the status of an insignificant and ruined Balkan semi-protectorate. In such a conjuncture, reference to nationhood indicates that there is a problem of regaining national sovereignty as a prerequisite for exercising not even anticapitalist but democratic and progressive policies of the most elementary kind.

This project, finally, and this is in no way incompatible with what has just been stated, is profoundly internationalist. This is not only because defense of the vital class interests of the working people and the popular strata of a country is by its nature internationalist, given that exploited people of

different countries have common interests. It is internationalist in a much more concrete sense, because a breach in the weak link in the eurozone and the EU opens the way for other ruptures in Europe and administers a powerful blow to the reactionary and anti-popular EU edifice.

Not only does our internationalism have nothing to do with the euro and the EU, but there will arise on its foundations an ever greater resistance to, and rejection of, these formations by the peoples of Europe.

The fight of the Greek and of the other European people against the iron cage of the EU will reveal the class and imperialist character of this edifice and will thus allow the struggles inside the historical center of world capitalism to connect with the broader movements against imperialist and capitalist domination at a global scale, and more particularly with the movements of the Global South, which begins just at the other side of the Mediterranean.

Let us not forget here that in the landmark year of 2011, the first wave of popular rebellion after the onset of the 2008 crisis led to the nearly simultaneous outburst of the Arab Spring and of the Greek and Spanish movements of the occupation of city squares.

What we can now draw as a conclusion from the political experience that followed is that the perspective of a genuine “other Europe,” which cannot be but socialist in orientation, requires the dissolution of today’s eurozone and of the EU, starting with breaks in the weakest links. In addition, this dissolution is a prerequisite for a proper break on the part of Europe — both with its colonial past and with its neocolonial and imperialist present.

As a conclusion, I would say that we have been taught a harsh lesson, and at a very heavy price. As is usually true in this type of situation, the first to be called on to pay the price will be workers, and in this case Greece as a country and as a society. But for us, for the forces of the radical and of the anticapitalist left, it was a necessary lesson. It can lead to our destruction, but also to a new beginning. Or as our great poet Kostis Palamas put it, to a “new birth” — if we can reflect on it and at the same time act.

Stathis Kouvelakis

P.S.

* Jacobin. 8.3.15:

<https://www.jacobinmag.com/2015/08/tsipras-debt-germany-greece-euro/>

* Adapted from a speech at the public meeting organized by the webzine Kommon, in Athens, July 23. Many thanks to Panagiotis Frantzis for his help in transcribing the speech and to Wayne Hall for the translation.

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Footnotes

[1] See on ESSF (article 33957), [Greece: Thessaloniki Syriza’s governmental program](#).