

Greece's Exit from the Eurozone? The Rumbblings of the Left. Podemos, Syriza

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"We didn't choose the terrain. We inherited it. We have the government, but we don't have the power." – Salvador Allende, Chilean President (1970-73)

The left – and by this, the genuine, progressive, unmanagerial left – is getting noisy. The Greek elections are upon us, with the similar challenges being played out from 2012. There are fears of Grexit – a heavy breathing departure from the eurozone that will do everything to rattle the central currency mechanism that has been taking a battering. The polls were prompted by an impasse facing centre-right Prime Minister Antonis Samaras, who assumed that further economic restructuring could not take place as things stood. The bailout conditions had become unworkable.

Much of this has been triggered by the moral outrage and political response of the left grouping centred on Syriza of Greece. The movement has been said to have similarities to a new constellation of power in Spain, led by Podemos. Syriza, led by Alexis Tsipras, has promised to renegotiate the terms of Greece's 240 billion euro international bailout arrangements. Both parties point out to the distance between elector and the elected, a creeping death of democratic accountability in favour of market propriety.

Pablo Iglesias Turrion of Podemos, speaking before a large Syriza rally in Athens on January 22, spoke about a revived defence of sovereignty and the parties who tend to vote along the lines of brokers in Wall Street. The Third International was a meek, insignificant force relative to the "world wide party" that is Wall Street, that of Finance International. (He barely needs to name them, but points the finger at the incumbents in Greece, France, Italy, Germany, the European Commission.) "We are called upon to defend democracy and sovereignty, but what's more, we have to defend them on a terrain, like [Salvador] Allende said, that we ourselves have not chosen."

There is a dispiriting similarity between standard platforms – the centre-Right and centre-Left look astonishingly like centrist chair swappers, changing the furniture in mild fashion after each election. The only winner in that case is, it would seem, is the manager and the market. (The distinction is almost irrelevant these days, the two holding hands in defiance of the democratic compact.) The message is austerity, belt-tightening, and pure accounting, while shares perform and dividends are gathered. The public good is no where to be seen.

Alternatives, notably ones where change may actually take place vis-à-vis the austerity dogma, are always viewed in apocalyptic terms. Mild mannered reviewers become frothing fanatics. The establishment scribblers rally to the market cause, attributing to it personality and such tendencies as being able to be "spooked". "Greece's creditors insist the country must abide by previous commitments to continue receiving support, and investors and

markets alike have been spooked by the anti-bailout rhetoric,” cites an *Associated Press* (Jan 25) article.

Mainstream media outlets speak of Syriza as a radical-left movement that is “Communist-rooted”, reviving the old notion that a red in the market is as bad as one under the bed. But as Iglesias points out, discussing fiscal reform, auditing national debt, collective control of parts of an economy, improvement of public services, public investment for employment, and protecting small and medium enterprises “is what any social democrat in Western Europe would have talked about 30 or 40 years ago.”

In the case of Greece, there is a fundamentally anti-democratic streak lurking in the creditor wings: the Greeks are allowed to make their choice at the polls, with a damning, money-bound caveat. The so called troika – the European Commission, the International Monetary Fund and the European Central Bank – will deem what is appropriate, a relationship that Syriza is promising to challenge.

As Slavoj Žižek would state with emphatic confidence, “Next Sunday, January 25, this will not be the case – as on June 17, 2012, the Greek voters are facing a real choice: the establishment on the one side; Syriza, the radical leftist coalition, on the other hand” (*In These Times*, Jan 22).

They are fighting such instruments of policy as oppressive debt, which he deems to be a device of subordination. “The true goal of lending money to the debtor is not to get the debt reimbursed with a profit, but the indefinite continuation of the debt which keeps the debtor in permanent dependency and subordination.”

Žižek’s suggestion here is that a cathartic release for Europe is needed: Grexit is the shedding Europe needs to provide a resuscitating boost for democratic governance and the egalitarian experiment. He cites T.S. Eliot as an authority, “when the only way to keep a religion alive is to perform a sectarian split from its main corpse.” To sever is to save.

Whether the Greek option results in such a sectarian split is the largest of questions. The heat of Syriza’s radical nature may cool once the decisions have to be made. The issue now is whether the movement can be preserved in such a state of affairs, becoming not merely an alternative in vote, but an alternative in practice.

The alternative, interestingly enough, harks back to a past before social democracy was read its funeral rites, one resonant of a certain civic decency outlined by Iglesias: “To love your country is to defend your grandparents’ pension and to ensure that if they get sick they will be cared for in the best public hospitals.”

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