

Greece: Syriza's Challenge. Combating Post-Democracy

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"Marx's once scandalous thesis that governments are simple business agents for international capital is today an obvious fact on which 'liberals' and 'socialists' agree." - Jacques Rancière, Dis-agreement (1999), 113

Across Europe, and more specifically, the euro-zone, a spectre did not so much haunt as totally materialise in the form of Alex Tsipras and the Syriza party. Greece woke up to a new party that had never seen office, coming within a few seats of governing in its own right. Any European party would have salivated at such an outcome - coalitions tend to be a matter of course, and majorities normally associated with authoritarian types. In the Greek case, the order established during the post-junta period had been overturned - at least on electoral paper.

Tsipras, in just falling short of the 151 number required to form government, has sought support from other potential partners. To date, it seems that the right-wing ANEL Independent Greeks party has agreed to muck in. Both have a common anti-bailout position, though it remains to be seen what else they can find common ground about.

This immediately got the leaving incumbents speculating that the union would not last, a desperate attempt at premature Schadenfreude. Petros Doukas, former deputy finance minister, pondered that, "It's ultimately going to be much more difficult to figure out exactly what policies they will ultimately agree on."

A mixture of euphoria and terror has met the result. The latter reaction is typical of the market-managers who see earnings being whittled away in speculation and a rocking of the financial sector. The market, in such language, is a sanctified deity which should be propitiated. It is not something to control, let alone directed by human hand. It has its own inscrutable morality.

Consider the wording of Nick Squires (*The Telegraph*, Jan 26), as he was monitoring the numbers: "The surprise alliance between two staunchly anti-bailout parties, spooked markets and triggered a loss of nearly 4 percent on the Athens Stock Exchange as well as elsewhere in Europe."

But the Syriza victory is more significant in another sense: the challenge it poses to democracy in the euro-zone. The issues of austerity and debt cannot be divorced from that of political management. Where, given Syriza's jarring win, does that sit in the European rubric, frayed as it is? For one, the party faces what has been termed by French philosopher Jacques Rancière as the "post-democratic" moment.

Democratic institutions, in this age, are openly, and unquestionably, identified with the

market, something which distinctly takes the gloss off their accountability for the broad citizenry. “From an allegedly defunct Marxism,” argues Rancière in *Dis-agreement* (1999), “the supposedly reigning liberalism borrows the theme of objective necessity, identified with the constraints and caprices of the world market.” The company boardroom and the cabinet meeting room, have become one.

Axiomatic to this is the creation of the debt, or indebted society, a system of control that works through imposing punishment, providing dispensation, and reimposing punishment in accordance with the manager’s logic. The manager works according to biblical dictates, moralising the world of debt, frowning against the heavily indebted, but frowning even more when the debts are paid.

Colin Crouch, who had already written about post-democracy in 2004, sees the Greek-austerity policy adopted, and imposed, by the troika, as its ultimate form in action, debt fanaticism generated from above. It is a situation where bankers and financiers, responsible for a crisis (the Global Financial Crisis being their supreme handiwork), manage it through compliant governments who, in turn, forged a response sympathetic to bankers and financiers “at the expense of the rest of the population.”

For Crouch, “the most explicit expression of the post-democratic aspects of crisis management was the framing of the Greek austerity package, designed by international authorities in close collaboration with an association of leading bankers” (LSE Blogs, 2013).[1]

There are even some writers who feel that another, more threatening stage in the funereal rites of democracy is being read, something far more sinister: that which totally inverts it, creating a form of self-defeating totalitarianism.

Little surprise, then, that European leaders warn of irresponsible democratic behaviour, one that will lead to bank runs and negative European Central Bank briefings. (Eight billion euros was withdrawn from Greece in the last week alone.) Ultimatums are being hinted at: if you are against austerity, then you must be against the euro-zone. British Prime Minister David Cameron, having only recently glowed at the achievements of the late authoritarian Saudi monarch, King Abdullah, found Greek democratic judgement a touch too much to bear. “The Greek election will increase economic uncertainty across Europe.” (Twitter, Jan 25).

For all those reasons, the austerity brigade, with its philosophy, has taken a battering. Savage cuts and so-called structural reforms to the Greek economy have actually served to increase unemployment and shrink the welfare state. This can be laid squarely at the feet of those who have become Greece’s economic managers, these post-democratic managers in the form of the European Commission, European Central Bank and International Monetary Fund.

The mountain to be scaled by Syriza is a monumental one. Come March, seven billion euros worth of debt will mature with menacing, guilt-worn clout. Liquidity will be needed, but Tsipras will be very much in his rights to ask for debt cancellation and a readjustment of bailout terms. But even cancellation will not let Greece off the hook, giving only a false hope and liberation from a distinctly unequal financial system within a zone that is artificially democratic. The words of the Greek electronic music band from 1992, Stereo Nova, may still apply: “My country is a colony of a larger colony.”[2]

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Notes

[1] <http://blogs.lse.ac.uk/politicsandpolicy/five-minutes-with-colin-crouch/>

[2] <http://www.chronosmag.eu/index.php/y-stavarakakis-my-country-is-the-colony-of-a-larger-colony.html>

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