

Two Lessons From Syriza's Two (Biggest) Mistakes

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That Syriza has made mistakes isn't in dispute: they themselves have admitted to two main ones.

1) They failed to recognize, despite early [warnings](#) from party members such as [Costas Lapavistas](#), that the EU was negotiating in bad faith. The EU's intention was never to reach an agreement but to destroy Syriza and with it the hope that the victims of the endless bleeding of austerity had any democratic recourse. Furthermore, the negotiations were themselves a tactic in that, as former finance minister Yanis Varoufakis [now admits](#), they prevented him from focussing on the one thing which Syriza could have used in its negotiations: a viable plan to exit the Eurozone in a way which minimized disruption to the economy and maximize the chances that it would return to health in the shortest possible time.

2) We now know from Varoufakis that Syriza had "a small group . . . within the ministry, of about five people" that were planning in secret for a Grexit. This was, as he concedes, not even close to what was required to effect a viable transition to a new currency. Of course, no serious person should have any illusions that a Grexit would be "easy", even with a massive investment in staff and infrastructure, any more than recovering from a major earthquake, hurricane or bombing of a nation's major cities by a foreign power. Rather, just as a government is expected to prepare for disasters whether these are acts of god or attacks from hostile foreign powers, Syriza was derelict in failing to plan for what Varoufakis now accepts was "a coup" albeit executed not by "tanks" but by "banks".

1) The Bankruptcy of "Speaking Truth to Power" Liberalism

Despite Syriza's self-definition as "the party of the radical left", much of its leadership and many of its advisers would reject the designation, more accurately being categorized within our political lexicon as liberals. Among these is Varoufakis's close friend and UT Austin colleague Jamie Galbraith who described himself as "a reasonable and hopeful observer" of Syriza's initial negotiations with the E.U. Rather than dismiss as a right wing ideologue German Chancellor Angela Merkel Galbraith [praised her](#) for "having made some of the mildest comments of any German politician," and for having "chosen with care" her words on the subject of debt relief which, according to him, she had not rejected.

Galbraith's [report](#) of the negotiations gave further grounds for hope that "the German government, having taken a very tough line through the process, took a step back from that tough line in order to secure a basic framework agreement for going forward."

As we now know, the softening on the German's hard line was a liberal chimera. Galbraith [now recognizes](#) that "the negotiations were a bit of a farce all along" and has

admitted that he should have recognized that Chancellor Merkel was always “completely unreceptive.”

Varoufakis, while famously defining his political orientation as “Marxist” (albeit “erratic”) evidently shared Galbraith’s liberal confidence in the good will of the Eurocrat negotiators. This is apparent in his surprise when his attempts to reason with them were unsatisfactory- to put it mildly. According to [his recent interview](#) in the *New Statesmen*,

It’s not that (they) didn’t go down well – it’s that there was point blank refusal to engage in economic arguments. Point blank. ... You put forward an argument that you’ve really worked on – to make sure it’s logically coherent – and you’re just faced with blank stares. It is as if you haven’t spoken. What you say is independent of what they say. You might as well have sung the Swedish national anthem – you’d have got the same reply. And that’s startling, for somebody who’s used to academic debate. ... The other side always engages. Well there was no engagement at all. It was not even annoyance, it was as if one had not spoken.

What is on display is the disenchantment of liberals who operated on a presumption of good intentions and underlying rationality of elite technocrats. Radicals such as Lapavistas do not. For them, providing “arguments” to the institutional representatives of capital makes no more sense than addressing a hyena with its fangs clamped on one’s jugular. The hyena is acting not according to reason but according to its fundamental nature and so are the capitalist hyenas who were the Syriza’s negotiating partners.

It was foolish to negotiate with any other expectation, as both Varoufakis and Galbraith now have effectively conceded.

2) Goldman Sachs DOES care (if you raise chickens)

A second explanation for one of Syriza’s crucial mistakes involves assumptions made by segments of their left, as opposed to (neo-) liberal wing, which includes Varoufakis and others who he [refers to](#) as “committed Europeanists.” By that he means that they are committed to the longstanding principle of left internationalism and cosmopolitanism. They also tend to view favorably the comparative advantage accruing to globalized trading networks which provide the economies of scale making possible large efficiencies in production of basic goods and also in making available raw materials at low cost. While their position is reasonable, it also has a negative side in that internationalists tend to denigrate the potential of local, small scale experiments in alternative economic systems of the sort which have been championed by [Richard Wolff](#) and [Gar Alperowitz](#) among others under the heading of worker self directed enterprises and workplace democracy.

Why this matters is that it is apparent that some form of what Wolff and Alperowitz are proposing will be crucial in the event of a Grexit. Prior to a national currency being re-established, local networks of production and exchange of the sort which globalization has long since eradicated will need to be revived and again made viable. That includes, incidentally, various forms of local food production of the sort denigrated by the verticalist left under the [widely circulated meme](#) “Goldman Sachs doesn’t care if you raise chickens.”

In fact, whether Greece will collapse into chaos and starvation will have to do with whether they are able to reduce their reliance on imported goods ramping up local production in all

spheres including most crucially in food production-not as a neo-Calvinist moral imperative but to maintain a minimal caloric intake. It is likely that many small scale initiatives will need to be launched and developed to accomplish that, some along the lines the WW II Victory Gardens whose production [equalled that all commercial sources](#) of vegetables during the war years. Of course, Goldman Sachs would like nothing better than for Greek efforts at self-reliance to fail which is to say they hope the Greeks don't raise chickens-and starve for not having done so: the exact opposite of facile, leftist conventional wisdom.

Conclusion: [No War but the Class War](#)

While small, the Victory Gardens were not an insignificant contribution to a nation in a state of war. And, to reiterate the point, the comparison of a state of war to what will be required of under a Grexit is entirely appropriate.

For while some of us want to avert our eyes, the left always recognized that the war by the rich against the poor is a war just as much as any other. An economic war does not involve missiles, antipersonnel weapons and M-16s. Its weapons are state enforced privatization schemes, debt swaps and interest rate manipulation. Rather than puncture wounds, severed limbs and the casualties take the form of thousands of unnecessary deaths due to adequately staffed and supplied hospitals, bacterial infections due to inadequately maintained sewage treatment facilities and collapsing buildings, food poisoning epidemics due to the mass layoffs of inspectors in regulatory agencies. An almost endless list can be compiled itemizing the social collapse resulting from economic warfare carried about by fountain pens rather than guns. Varoufakis has now woken up to the reality that his country has been attacked by an axis of foreign powers, that they are bent on its destruction and have one goal in mind: claiming the spoils of victory, disbursing to their owners in the investor class. It is time the rest of the left joined him there and here-on our feet and ready to fight them, in whatever way we can.

John Halle blogs at [Outrages and Interludes](#).

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