

Syriza Can't Save Greece

Why There's No Electoral Exit from the Crisis

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On January 25, after years of economic crisis and austerity measures, Greek voters chose the political party Syriza to take the reins of the state. Formed from a coalition of socialist, communist, and Green groups, Syriza appears to be sympathetic to autonomous social movements; its leaders promise to take steps against austerity and police violence.

Many outside Greece first heard of Syriza in December 2008, when, as a far-left group commanding less than 5% of the electorate, it was practically the only party that did not condemn the riots that followed the police murder of Alexandros Grigoropoulos. Since then, Syriza has become the most powerful party in Greece, drawing many of the voters who had supported less radical parties—and some movement participants who previously supported no parties at all. Even some Greek anarchists are hoping that after years of pitched violence and repression, the election of Syriza will provide a much-needed breather.

But will Syriza's victory offer oxygen to movements for social change—or suffocate them? We've seen such promises of "hope and change" before; notably, when Obama won the presidential election in the US, but also when Lula and other Left politicians came to power in Latin America. When Lula was elected in 2002, Brazil hosted some of the world's most powerful social movements; his victory was such a setback to grassroots organizing that it took until 2013 for Brazilians to mount a real challenge to the neoliberal projects that he took up from his predecessors.

The consequences of Syriza's victory will be felt around the world, especially for participants in the social movements they wish to represent. Parties modeled on Syriza are on the rise all over Europe. International financial institutions are watching the Greek laboratory, but so are millions of people who are fed up with being on the losing end of capitalism—as well as nationalist and fascist groups who hope to exploit their rage. We need to understand why these parties are drawing so much support, what their structural role is in maintaining capitalism and the state, and how their rise and inevitable fall will shift the context of resistance. Anarchists especially must prepare for the intense struggles that will follow as the terrain changes, lest we find ourselves alone and backed into a corner.

Political Parties in an Age of Uprisings

Poverty, unemployment, prohibitive tuition and healthcare costs, homelessness, hunger, forced migration, racism, criminalization, alienation, humiliation, suicide... These are not just the consequences of the financial crisis, but the conditions that precarious billions have experienced for decades as business as usual, serving as the laboratory mice in the neoliberal experiment. Yet thanks to the uneven distribution of the Fordist compromise, many Europeans were sheltered from this reality until the welfare state began to collapse in 2008.

With the onset of the financial crisis, many who had previously lived relatively comfortable middle-class lives were pushed into poverty overnight. Years of upheaval followed all around Europe—not only in Greece, but also in Iceland, Spain, England, Turkey. Almost every European country has experienced some kind of popular social rebellion since 2008, all the way up to stable, social-democratic Sweden. Most of these began as single-issue struggles—the student rebellion in Croatia, protests against gold mining in Romania, the anti-corruption protests in Slovenia—but swiftly gained a more thoroughgoing character, opposing themselves to austerity and the political system or even to capitalism and the state. Mayors and ministers resigned, police sta-

tions and parliaments burned, governments fell. It wasn't just anarchists at the core of these movements—in some countries, such as Ukraine and Bulgaria, the movements veered in a nationalistic direction. But everywhere, these protests became a space in which people who would never previously have been politically aligned could express their anger together; in many places, such as Bosnia, the most militant participants were people who had never taken the streets before. Trust in parliamentary democracy plunged to a record low, and people rediscovered direct action.

Those protests were anything but monolithic, and they remained more reformist than radical. Many peaked with small victories, such as the resignation of the government (as in Slovenia) or the promise of negotiations with the political elite (as in Bosnia). Participants who had expected easy changes were often left disappointed. But the volatile situation posed an increasing threat to the ruling order.

The state's first reaction was to criminalize resistance. On one hand, this was intended to intimidate those who were protesting for the first time: often the harshest sentences were doled out to the least experienced participants, who lacked support networks. On the other hand, repression was focused on anarchists and other determined enemies of the ruling order. In the past decade, we have seen scores of social centers evicted (Ungdomshuset in Denmark, Villa Amalias in Greece, Klinika in Prague) and "anti-terror" crackdowns on dissent such as Operation Pandora in Spain and the continuing harassment of anarchists in the UK. Spain, Greece, and other countries also introduced severe anti-protest laws.

The other response was to seek to coopt these movements. Protesters had proclaimed, "NO ONE REPRESENTS US"—not just as a complaint about the existing parties, but as a rejection of representation and liberal democracy. People who had just discovered their political power were experimenting with direct action and collective decision-making processes such as the popular assemblies in Spain, Greece, and Bosnia. In response, patronizing intellectuals and hysterical corporate media outlets demanded that protesters form political parties to unify their voices and negotiate with the state. At the same time, new political parties were positioning themselves within those movements by advocating for imprisoned protesters (like Syriza in Greece), backing protesters' agendas in the media and parliament (like Združena levica in Slovenia), and sharing resources (like Die Linke in Germany). They appeared to be developing a party-movement model, incorporating protest groups and demands into their organizational structure.

Syriza has its own unique origins in the specific context of Greece. So do Podemos in Spain, Die Linke in Germany, Parti de Gauche in France, Radnička fronta in Croatia, Združena levica in Slovenia, and Bloco de Esquerda in Portugal. But at this historical juncture, all of them serve the same basic function. Faced with so much unrest, the ruling order suddenly has a use for new radical political parties that promise to embody calls for "real democracy" within the existing system. Whatever the intentions of the participants, their structural role is to rebuild trust in electoral democracy, neutralize uncontrollable extra-parliamentary movements, and reestablish capitalism and the state as the only imaginable social order. When they enter the halls of power, they commit themselves to perpetuating the authoritarian institutions and unequal distribution of wealth that triggered the movements from which they appeared in the first place.

In times like these, those who benefit from the prevailing order are willing to risk small changes in order to avoid big ones. The emerging electoral popularity of these parties all over Europe shows that the chapter that opened with the Greek uprising of December 2008 has closed. If all

goes according to precedent, these parties will re-stabilize capitalism and state power, then pass from the stage of history, to be replaced by—or become—the next defenders of the status quo.

Greece, Periphery of the Future

Greece has been at the forefront of all these processes from the beginning. Greek comrades took to the streets years before revolts spread from Egypt to Brazil, and they have never really left them since, while the troika of lenders that bailed out the Greek economy—the European Commission, the European Central Bank, and the International Monetary Fund—imposed package after package of austerity measures.

What does this look like up close? A few years ago, anarchist groups around Europe were collecting money for a Greek comrade who needed to get her infant out of the country for an operation that would save her life. The reason was that, due to financial cuts, the Greek state had simply stopped performing certain surgeries. This story is just one among many, and most people did not have the privilege of a community to support them thus. While the fascists of the Golden Dawn killed comrades like Pavlos Fyssas on the streets and the police killed migrants on the Greek borders of Fortress Europe, the state killed poor people on the doorsteps of hospitals by denying them health care.

As the state closed down hospitals, television stations, schools, and kindergartens, anarchists and others self-organized to set up autonomous clinics, educational projects, public kitchens, social programs, and neighborhood assemblies. Over the following years, the Greek anarchist movement became a major social force, mobilizing tens of thousands of people to fight beside them. At the same time, this ideological polarization also benefitted fascists in Greece. Golden Dawn gained power in parliament as police officers swelled their ranks. Police repression of anarchist demonstrations became ceaselessly and mercilessly violent, while the far-right-controlled media maintained a conspiracy of silence and prisoners filled the new maximum-security prisons built under the most conservative government since the military junta fell in the 1970s.

These were the conditions in which a small coalition of Trotskyists, Maoists, Greens, and social democrats began to gain popularity under the name Syriza and the leadership of Alexis Tsipras. When thousands of people who did not belong to anarchist or leftist groups marched with anarchists and clashed with police in the fight against gold mining in Chalkidiki, the defense of the social center Villa Amalias, the struggle against Golden Dawn, and demonstrations in solidarity with migrants, Syriza took positions on the same issues. They spoke about them in a parliament and their members attended the demonstrations. Whenever possible, they took advantage of these struggles to gain recognition in the media.

Syriza promised the end of austerity measures—though for the elections, this rhetoric softened into promises to renegotiate the conditions of Greek debt. They promised to dismantle the most brutal police units—though for the elections, this was reduced to only disarming officers that come into direct contact with protesters. Syriza promised to leave NATO—though for the elections, this was reduced to not cooperating in foreign assault missions. Syriza promised to close down high-security prisons and reestablish the universities as a no-go zone for the police, a legal privilege the movement lost after December 2008 in what proved to be a huge setback in clashes with police.

Syriza has less power to mobilize people onto the street than anarchists, but the party successfully mobilized people to go to the voting polls. This aptly illustrates the transition that Syriza's supposed enemies would like to see social movements undergo in Greece and all around Europe. With some people spreading rumors that there could be electoral fraud or a military coup if Syriza wins, and others threatening that such a victory would result in Greece going bankrupt, the European ruling class is successfully concealing the fact that—compared to the social movements from which it arose—Syriza is a much safer bet for them. Just as police brutality can catalyze rather than suppress resistance, electoral fraud or military intervention might trigger a new wave of movements in Greece and all across Europe. The reactions to Syriza's election will be harsh in rhetoric but reconcilable in practice. Faced with the challenges of retaining state power, Syriza will probably deliver much less than they promised. In a globalized world, in which a country can go bankrupt overnight, capitalists don't need to stage a coup to get their way.

Our Dreams Will Never Fit in Their Ballot Boxes

For those who see no connection between the ways that electoral politics and capitalism concentrate power, it is tempting to imagine that a new political party could finally make the system work the way "it is supposed to." But even anarchists, who have no faith in representational politics or reform, might hope that a Syriza-led government could create a more conducive environment for resistance. Indeed, it is an open secret that members of Syriza have served as the lawyers of many anarchists; why shouldn't they continue to play a protective role at the helm of the state?

All this is hopelessly naïve. In the long run, no party can solve the problems created by capitalism and the state, and Syriza's victory will only hinder the revolutionary movements that we need. Here's why.

Syriza will reestablish the legitimacy of the institutions that are responsible for the crisis in the first place.

Indeed, the entry of Syriza into power has already re-legitimized the institutions of government for many who had lost faith in them. Regardless of Syriza's intentions, it is this same government apparatus that forces the effects of capitalism upon people, blocking access to the resources they need. Even if it *were* possible for Syriza to use state power to combat the effects of capitalist accumulation, sooner or later the reins of the state will return to the hands of those who usually hold them. When that happens, efforts to delegitimize the government will begin all over again from scratch.

This cycle of disillusionment and re-legitimization has served to preserve the authoritarian structures of the state for centuries, always deferring the struggle for real freedom beyond the horizon. It's an old story stretching from the French revolutions of 1789, 1848, and 1870, through the Russian revolution and the national liberation struggles of the 20th century, right up to the election of Obama.

Syriza itself will do nothing to undermine the fundamental hierarchies of politics. Many of these new left parties started as ostensibly horizontal networks, promising real transparency and democratic decision-making processes. But as they grow, they inevitably abandon horizontal structures and come to mimic the older parties they claim to oppose. These changes are often

justified as political pragmatism or solutions to the problem of scale—and indeed, the exigencies of representational politics do not lend themselves to the sort of horizontal, autonomous structures that can arise in genuine grassroots social movements. So it is that at the top of every successful party like Syriza, Združena levica, or Podemos, we can expect to find a charismatic leader like Alexis Tsipras, Luka Mesec, or Pablo Iglesias. These leaders' personalities become entangled with the parties, in ways reminiscent of Hugo Chavez and other famous politicians of the Left. If you are building a party that has to play according to state's rules, you will end up with a structure that mirrors the state. This internal transformation is the first step towards re-establishing the status quo.

Leftist parties have always displayed a contradictory attitude towards the state. In theory, they assert that the state is merely a necessary evil on the path towards a classless society; on the field of realpolitik they always protect and defend its repressive mechanisms—for no one who wishes to hold state power can do without them. Some of these new parties do not even wait to gain power to take that path; in Slovenia, as part of their struggle against austerity, the left opposition party Združena levica has called for the police to receive better equipment and more officers. Today, these new political parties see state power as an essential precondition for their struggle against neoliberalism; rejecting the privatization of state owned companies, they propose nationalization as one of the primary ways to fight the consequences of economic crisis. Their goal is not to dismantle the state and the economic disparities it imposes, but to preserve the bourgeois ideal of the welfare state with a neo-Keynesian economic program.

When this was possible in the past, it was only possible for a few privileged nations at the expense of exploited millions around the globe—and even the beneficiaries of this arrangement weren't sure they wanted it, as the countercultural rebellions of the 1960s showed. Today, when capitalist accumulation has intensified to such a degree that only massive austerity programs can keep the economy running, the old compromises of social democracy have become impossible, and everyone acknowledges this except the snake oil salesmen of the left. The doomsaying of German economists who are concerned that Syriza will sink the Greek economy is true enough: in a globalized economy, there is no way to redistribute wealth without causing capital flight, unless we are prepared to abolish capitalism along with the state structures that preserve it.

Most of the participants in the movements of the past seven years are not yet prepared to go so far. They entered the streets out of frustration with the existing governments, but they saw these movements as a way to seek an immediate solution, not as a single stage in a centuries-long struggle against capitalism. When the protests didn't produce immediate results, they joined parties like Syriza that promised quick, easy solutions. But what seems pragmatic today will be an embarrassing mistake that everyone remembers with a headache tomorrow. Isn't that always how it goes with parties?

Syriza has no choice now except to enforce order, pacifying the movements that propelled them into power.

It is too early to predict what the precise relationship will be between the new governing party and the movements that put them in place. We can only speculate based on past precedents.

Let's return to the Brazilian example. After Lula came to power, the most powerful social movement in Brazil, the 1.5-million-strong land reform campaign MST (*Movimento dos Trabalhadores Sem Terra*), found itself in a considerably worse position than it had faced under the preced-

ing conservative government. Although it shared considerable membership and leadership with Lula's own party, the necessities of governing precluded Lula from assisting it. Though the MST had managed to compel the previous government to legalize many land occupations, it ceased to make any headway whatsoever under Lula. This pattern has played out all across Latin America as politicians have betrayed the social movements that put them in office. This is a good argument for building up strength we can use on our own terms, autonomously, rather than trying to get sympathetic politicians into office—for once they are in office, they must act according to the logic of their post, not the logic of the movement.

Syriza came to power by courting votes and watering down demands. Representative democracy tends to reduce politics to a matter of lowest common denominators, as parties jockey to attract voters and form coalitions. Indeed, Syriza's first move after the election was to establish a coalition with Independent Greeks, a right-wing party. In order to preserve this coalition, Syriza will have to make concessions to their partners' agenda. This will mean, first, forcing unwanted right-wing policies past its own membership—and then enforcing those policies on everyone else. There's no getting around the essentially coercive nature of governing.

Many anarchists hope Syriza will put the brakes on state repression of social movements, enabling them to develop more freely. Didn't Syriza essentially support the riots of 2008? But back then, they were a small party looking for allies; now they are the ruling elite. In order to retain the reins of the state, they must show that they are prepared to enforce the rule of law. Though they may not prosecute minor protest activity as aggressively as a right-wing government would, they will still have to divide protesters into legitimate and illegitimate—a move out of the counterinsurgency handbook that guides governments and occupying armies the whole world over. This would not be new for Greece; the same thing happened under the social democrats of PASOK in the early 1980s. Even if Syriza's government does not seek to maintain the previous level of repression, their function will be to divide movements, incorporating the docile and marginalizing the rest. This might prove to be a more effective repressive strategy than brute force.

In these new conditions, the movements themselves will change. Syriza has already become involved in many grassroots social programs; they will probably offer the most cooperative of these projects more resources, but only under the mantle of the state. It will become harder and harder for grassroots organizers to remain truly autonomous, to demonstrate the difference between self-organization and management from above. Something like this has already occurred in the US non-profit sector with disastrous effects. We may also cite government involvement in supposedly grassroots neighborhood organizing in Venezuela under Hugo Chavez.

This kind of assimilation into the logic of the state is essential to parties like Syriza. They need movements that know how to behave themselves, that can serve to legitimize decisions made in the parliament without causing too much of a fuss. Indeed, the mere prospect that Syriza might come into power has kept the streets of Greece largely empty of protest since 2012, intensifying the risks for anarchists and others who continued to demonstrate. Parties on the Syriza model can pacify the public without even entering office.

So what happens to the rest of the movement, to those who continue to assert their autonomy, seeking to build power on their own terms outside the institutions? That is the question before us.

Where Syriza fails, fascism will grow.

Facing international pressure, a divided electorate, and the structural relationship between state and capital, Syriza cannot hope to resolve the day-to-day problems that most Greeks face as a result of unbridled capitalism. In the long term, this may open the gates for the last governmental solution that Greece has not yet tried: fascism.

A profit-driven economy inevitably concentrates wealth into fewer and fewer hands. In a globalized world, any country that tries to reverse this process scares off investors; this is why today even the wealthiest nations are being forced to feed all the infrastructure of social democracy into the fire, keeping the market healthy at the expense of the general population. This problem could be solved by the revolutionary abolition of private property and the state that defends it, but there is only one way to preserve the support infrastructure of social democracy while maintaining capitalism, and that is to narrow down who gets to benefit from it. This is the meaning of the food distribution programs Golden Dawn organizes “for Greeks only.” In this regard, nationalist and fascist parties have a more realistic plan for how to maintain the safety net of the white middle class than ordinary socialist parties do.

That’s why it is so dangerous for parties like Syriza to legitimize the idea that the government can solve the problems of capitalism by implementing more socialistic policies. When they fail to deliver on their promises, some of those who believed in them will turn to far-right parties who claim to have a more pragmatic way to accomplish the same thing. This is already happening all around Europe. In Sweden, the flagship of social democracy, decades of left-wing activism aimed at preserving government programs have just opened the way for fascists to claim that, in order to protect those programs, the borders must close.

But fascists need not take power to be dangerous. They are dangerous precisely because, like anarchists, they can carry out their agenda directly without need of the state apparatus. Indeed, we may be entering an era when a variety of political actors will find it more strategic to be positioned outside the government, so as to avoid being discredited with it. Now that the state can no longer mitigate the effects of capitalism, people are bound to become more and more disillusioned and rebellious. Where radical left parties hold state power, seeking to pacify their former comrades who remain in the streets, it will be easier for right-wing groups to present themselves as the real partisans of revolt—as they have in Venezuela, for example. The insurrections of the past decade are sure to continue, but the important question is what kind of insurrections they will be. Will they put people in touch with their own collective power, setting the stage for the final abolition of capitalism? Or will they look more like what happened last year in Ukraine?

With anti-Islamic hysteria and nationalist groups like Germany’s Pegida on the rise all over Europe, fascism is not just a future threat, but a clear and present danger. Leaving it to governments to deal with fascists via the rule of law is doubly dangerous: it supplants the agency of grassroots movements with the mediation of the authorities, and—once more—it legitimizes state institutions that may eventually fall into fascist hands. Some may consider Syriza a bulwark against fascism, but only autonomous social movements can defeat it: not simply by fighting against it reactively, but above all by demonstrating a more compelling vision of social change.

Fighting Harder, Wanting More

If Syriza's victory succeeds in lulling those who once met in the streets back into spectatorship and isolation, this will close the windows of possibility that opened during the uprisings, rendering Syriza themselves redundant and offering a new model by which to pacify social movements around the world. But they are playing with fire, promising solutions they cannot deliver. If their failure could open the door for fascism, it could also create a new phase of movements outside and against all authoritarian power.

“In my opinion, a possible government of SYRIZA, taken into account that its life will be short, should serve as a challenge for the people of the struggle. With action which will be what we call ‘anarchist provocations’ against the leftist rhetoric of SYRIZA, we should force them to reveal their true face which is no other than the face of capitalism that can neither be humanized nor rectified but only destroyed with constant struggle by all means.”

—Nikos Romanos, *writing from prison in Greece*

For this to be possible, anarchists in Greece and everywhere around the world must differentiate themselves from all political parties, inviting the general public to join them in spaces beyond the influence of even the most generous social democrats. This will mean facing off against the opportunistic politicians who once joined them in the street. It will not be easy, but it is the only way. If nothing else, now that the elections are over and Syriza stands on the other side of the walls of power, the lines are clear.

Abolishing capitalism and the state is still unthinkable for most people. Yet, as Greece has seen, the measures that could stabilize capitalism for another generation are still more unthinkable. In the day-to-day practices of Greek anarchists—the occupied social centers and university buildings, the self-defense patrols against Golden Dawn, the social programs and assemblies—we can see the first steps towards a world without property or government. If these practices reached an impasse in 2012, it was partly because so many people abandoned the streets in hopes of a Syriza victory. These are the examples to emulate from Greece, not the Syriza model. Let's stop dallying with false solutions.

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