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Greece Under German Pressure

The Democratic Right to Cry: "Enough!"

by SERGE HALIMI

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The Greeks don't need to have the meaning of the word "democracy" explained to them. Even so, they have been given countless lectures since voting in a leftwing government determined to end the austerity policies that have made their lives a misery for six years. The schoolmasterly reprimands have come from people who know what they are talking about: they are people who imposed treaties their electorates had voted against and reneged on campaign promises as soon as they came to power. They are now in a trial of strength with Syriza, which has been trying, against terrible odds, to stick to its promises and beliefs. That trial was all the tougher since those beliefs may spread thoughts of resistance to those hitherto resigned to powerlessness. This confrontation has been about more than just the fate of Greece: the future of European democracy is at stake (1).

Immediately after Syriza's victory, a message seemed to go round the whole continent: in the arrogant version of that message, Germany — along with Spain, the Netherlands, Portugal and Finland — made clear that the change of government in Athens made no difference: the policy the Greeks had rejected must be pursued unchanged. In more emollient tones, Italy, Belgium and France whispered the same thing: as French foreign minister Laurent Fabius put it, "Respect for the electorate has to be reconciled with respect for Greece's commitments to reform." But every EU government seems acquainted with only the reform part of this; they have been annoyed by Alexis Tsipras reminding them of the other part.

Though Syriza is isolated in the EU, hounded by its creditors and faced with capital flight, it is in fact trying to rehabilitate concepts that have become alien to democratic life, such as “sovereignty”, “dignity”, “pride” and “hope”. But how could it do so in a state of permanent financial crisis when it is forced to back down in each successive negotiation? And do so all the more painfully as the means designed to throttle the will of a restive populace were shown publicly, while the tormentors chuckled as they recounted the most recent confrontations.

Tsipras knew they were waiting for his total capitulation. Because every time he dug his heels in and mobilised the support of the Greek people, it was a challenge to the straightjacket of the current economic order and the engrained way of doing politics. After all, it took barely 24 hours after his election for President François Hollande to visit Berlin, tear up his campaign promises — the renegotiation of the European stability pact and the battle against his “real enemy”, finance — and calmly endorse his predecessor’s policies.

Less than 10 days after Syriza came to power, the eurozone’s central bankers fired their first salvo when they suddenly cut Greece’s banks off from the main source of funds. This was their way of forcing Greece to negotiate an urgent agreement with its creditors — other EU states and the IMF — and to reinstate the previous government’s austerity programme. Hollande judged the European Central Bank’s actions “legitimate”, as did the Italian prime minister, Matteo Renzi. We may not always know where exactly the French president stands, but we are in no doubt where he does *not* stand — with the people of Greece.

As Europe’s vice tightened and the financial markets stepped up the pressure on Greece, the rules of the game were becoming all too clear. Greece faced a diktat: in exchange for the funds it needed, it was being forced to endorse dogmatic, harmful demands with immediate effect, all of which were contrary to its government’s programme: further cuts in pensions and salaries; a further hike in the VAT rate; the privatisation of 14 airports; further reduction of trade unions’ bargaining power; the allocation of its rising budget surplus to paying off its creditors, at a time when the social distress of the people is acute. Pierre Moscovici, EU commissioner for economic affairs, summed up: “[Eurogroup] ministers all agreed there is no alternative to the demand that the current programme be continued.” Before he came out with Margaret Thatcher’s “there is no alternative”, Moscovici (perhaps remembering that he was a member of a socialist party) claimed: “What we want to do is help the Greek people” (2). Help them, while ruling out any departure from the austerity policy that has ruined them.

‘A debt colony that should suffer’

As its finance minister Yanis Varoufakis has made clear, Greece is “determined not to be treated like a debt colony that should suffer” (3). What is at stake goes beyond the right of a people to choose their destiny, even when a judge of democratic niceties as fine as German finance minister Wolfgang Schäuble reckons that they have “elected a government which is acting somewhat irresponsibly” (4). Because the question also concerns the possibility of a state extricating itself from destructive policies, rather than having to further toughen those policies each time they fail.

Since Europe's institutions turned their attention to Greece and subjected the EU's most depressed economy to its most draconian austerity policy, what success have they had? No better than was expected and just as they were warned: ballooning debt, collapsing spending power, lacklustre growth, soaring unemployment, declining health standards. But the EU's sound system remains stuck: "Greece must respect its commitments." The holy alliance, utterly convinced it is right, is unwilling to listen even to the US president, whose analysis is supported by a host of economists and historians. Barack Obama explained: "You cannot keep on squeezing countries that are in the midst of depression. At some point there has to be a growth strategy for them to pay off their debts" (5).

Greece's economic collapse, which has now lasted six years, is comparable to the damage that four years of military destruction and foreign occupation inflicted on France in the first world war (6). Which explains why Tsipras's government gets enormous popular support — even from the right — every time it refuses to prolong such a destructive policy, and why it is unwilling to survive "like a junkie waiting for his next fix" (7). But Syriza has few friends outside Greece. As in Agatha Christie's *Murder on the Orient Express*, to investigate the potential killers of Greece's hopes would mean interviewing every EU government, and the chief suspect would be Germany: the failed disciplinary strictures are German, and it intends to squeeze those — especially in Mediterranean countries — who refuse to endure them indefinitely (8). In Spain, Portugal and Ireland, the governments' motive for the crime is more sordid. Their citizens would benefit if the iron fist of austerity stopped pounding them. But their governments are afraid, especially when they feel threatened by a domestic challenge from the left, that Greece will demonstrate that it is possible to refuse to follow "a well-marked path, a known path, a path that the markets and the institutions and all the European authorities know," the path that French finance minister Michel Sapin claims must be "explored right to the end" (9). The prospect of Greece breaking free would show that all these governments were gravely mistaken to make their people suffer needlessly.

Everyone knows that getting Greece's debt repaid would be like "extracting blood from a stone" (Paul Krugman, *The New York Times*, 29 January). So why isn't it equally clear that Syriza's economic strategy to finance urgent social expenditure through a determined fight against tax fraud could draw on a young, determined, popular, political force, originating in social movements and free of the compromises and corruption of the past? Even if not marked out, the path is discernible. The uncertain future brings to mind what the philosopher Simone Weil wrote about workers' strikes in France in June 1936: "No one knows how things will turn out. There is reason to fear a range of disasters. ... But no fear can erase the joy of seeing those who have always had to bow their heads, by definition, standing up for themselves. ... Whatever may happen next, we will always have had this. For the first time, and forever, there will be other memories floating around these heavy machines than silence, coercion and submissiveness" (10). The Greeks' struggle is universal. Our good wishes no longer suffice. The solidarity it deserves calls for action. Time is still, as always, running out.

Notes.

(1) See "A modest and crazy dream", *Le Monde diplomatique*, English edition, February 2015.

- (2) *Les Echos*, Paris, 17 February 2015; Europe 1, 12 February 2015.
- (3) *The New York Times*, 17 February 2015.
- (4) Interview on German public radio, Deutschlandfunk, 16 February 2015.
- (5) Barack Obama, interview on CNN, 1 February 2015.
- (6) Taking 1913 as the base year and GDP as 100, French GDP had declined to 75.3 by 1919 (Jean-Paul Barrière, *La France au XXe siècle*, Hachette, Paris, 2000). American economist Paul Krugman explained in the *New York Times* on 17 February 2015 that Greece's GDP had declined by 26% between 2007 and 2013, compared with a 29% drop in Germany between 1913 and 1919.
- (7) Interview with Yanis Varoufakis, *Le Monde*, 3 February 2015.
- (8) Since 1997, the size of Germany's budget deficit has triggered EU intervention eight times and France's 11 times.
- (9) Statement by Michel Sapin reported in "Réunion de l'Eurogroupe sur la Grèce" (Brussels, 16 February 2015); www.rpfrance.eu
- (10) Simone Weil, "La vie et la grève des ouvrières métallos" (The life and strikes of metalworkers), *Œuvres complètes: Ecrits historiques et politiques*, vol 2, Gallimard, Paris, 1991.