

What's Left in Hellas? On the Transformation of Social Movements in Greece

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While ancient Greece is seen as the cradle of modern democracy, contemporary Greece is considered a backward political and economic problem case, a mixture of Mediterranean inefficiency and Balkan-style nepotism. However, the opposite claim is at least as adequate: it is in fact increasing societal 'modernisation' (rather than degeneration) that has produced social contradictions and political conflicts in a very acute form. Since 2008, Greece has become a laboratory of crisis, a paradigmatic showcase of contemporary struggles over social and political participation. To put it bluntly: in hardly any other European country do authoritarian and democratic concepts for solving the current structural crisis of society clash as heavily. In this situation, the different strands of the political left and the social movements they decisively shaped can look back over a long tradition of political struggle against authoritarian and dictatorial forms of social domination.

The collapse of Eastern European socialist systems between 1989 and 1991 plunged the political left in Greece into a serious crisis of orientation, because since 1917 different varieties of Leninism had served as main influence on the theory and practice of the anticapitalist left. Additionally, the bloody restructuring of Yugoslavia caused also in Greece a wave of nationalist mobilisation. The different strands of the political left and the social movements influenced by them found themselves on the defensive. For the first time after a long period of PASOK (*Panhellenic Socialist Movement*) dominance, ND (*New Democracy*), a right-liberal party, was able to form a government and to start an aggressive neoliberal offensive against the social and democratic achievements of the *Metapolitevsi* – as the political order established after the overthrow of the military junta is called.

Controversy focused on two sectors of public service provision: the education system and local public transport. Both became paradigmatic for the class struggles of the 1990s and 2000s: the education system started advertising the neoliberal promise of economic and social success for individuals. The privatisation of the public sector was sold as the prospect of better and cheaper services for the citizens.

The popularity of this programme rested on the role of the state in Greece. The development of welfare state provision had remained extremely limited for most of the 20th century. It was only after the election victory of PASOK in 1981 that the universal education and health service systems were introduced. To some extent, the new government liberalised employment and industrial relations regulations. Before, social service provision had relied primarily on clientelist relationships of dependency, in other words, on political despotism. Those social groups not integrated into clientelist networks, shaped around persons in leading political positions, often found themselves at the receiving end of state repression. Above all, this applied to the political left which, after defeat in the civil war (1946-49), was practically excluded from access to the public sector.¹ The majority of the population experienced the state primarily as a policing and taxing power.

Neither qualification nor professional expertise but subordination and personal relationships opened the doors to economic success. Emigration to Western Europe, North America or Australia provided the way out of the Greek misery but simultaneously stabilised the system of clientelism, which in modified form has lived on until today.

For the first time in the recent past, the rise of PASOK provided the prospect of social advance for the lower classes. Traditionally, the Greek state integrates large parts of the working class through its role as public sector employer. Although public sector jobs were never particularly well paid, they provided basic existential security. With the rise of PASOK, traditional clientelism changed into party clientelism: PASOK membership or membership of the trade union affiliated to it (the PASKE) paved the way to a job in a state enterprise. Until the 2000s, PASKE in exchange guaranteed PASOK's dominance in union confederations such as GSEE (*Confederation of the Workers of Greece, Industrial Sector*) and ADEDY (*Supreme Leadership of the Organisations of Public Sector Employees*). In other words: a large part of unionised employees was either indirectly or directly exposed to the government's political influence. ²To some extent this still also applied to ND, at the time the liberal-conservative opposition party. Loyalty to the nation

state of the political right and their representatives was substituted by loyalty to one of the major parties or the organisations close to them. The labour movement's split into unions that are tied to political parties is characteristic for this social power relationship. As a consequence, the two communist parties – the orthodox KKE and the Eurocommunist KKE *esoteriko* – remained excluded from state power for decades.

This clientelist socio-economic political system, however, was permanently challenged. When in the mid-1980s the minister of economics and later prime minister, Kostas Simitis, implemented a programme of social cuts, a huge strike movement emerged, culminating in a break within PASKE into an 'official' and an 'unofficial' wing. When the 'unofficial' strand together with communist left achieved a majority in the union confederation and was about to elect a new leadership, this process was blocked by direct government intervention. Such government interference into workers' freedom of organisation is rather typical for the history of labour relations in Greece and has become the usual practice in times of crisis.

This experience left many people disillusioned with the PASOK leadership's party-political clientelism – hence the prospect of the liberalisation of public life and of the state's retreat from

public services began to look attractive to many in the early 1990s. However, quite soon it became obvious that the consequences were extremely mixed. The reforms in the education system did not so much create new routes of upward mobility – a change that would have considered the altered composition of the Greek working class resulting from immigration. Quite to the contrary, the introduction of more rigorous exam procedures narrowed the bottleneck of upward mobility and increased competition. For public sector employees, denationalisation, as privatisation is called in Greece, meant poorer working conditions or the loss of a social position that until then was relatively secure.

Hence, in no other European country did people fight against the neoliberal agenda from early on as radically as in Greece. Therefore, the project of a thorough neoliberal restructuring of society lost most of its dynamics, albeit without a fundamental reorientation among society's elites. For social movement activists, however, the lessons of the fights of the early 1990s became central: social progress requires autonomously organised struggle.

When PASOK regained power in 1993, it returned a couple of companies to state ownership but Kostas Simitis, who had been elected party leader after Andreas Papandreou's death, continued, as prime minister,

the neoliberal reforms, as did the succeeding governments.³ These efforts were motivated by the prospect of access to the *European Monetary Union*, promoted by the EU's central powers, Germany and France, which committed Greece to the Maastricht convergence criteria of 2001. In two decisive fields the Greek state handed over decision making powers: namely fiscal and central bank policies. Wage and tax policies remained as the only tools to adapt to those economic imbalances that became worse over subsequent years.

Since the two small parties following communist traditions were incapable of opposing this agenda, initiative increasingly fell to political forces, which hitherto had been marginal: to the extra-parliamentary Marxist left and to several anarchist groups. They worked with new forms of organisation and political action that did not prioritise the taking over of state power. Due to continuing resistance by these social movements, the state enterprises – among them *Hellas Telecom*, refineries, the railways, the electricity sector and *Olympic Airways* – could only be privatised incrementally. Consequently, the first to be affected by deregulation were non- or weakly unionised segments of the private sector and especially young people. The neoliberal policies rested on two central economic preconditions: on the one hand, after the collapse of

the *Eastern Bloc*, Greece became an immigration country. In an overall population of about 10 million people, the number of immigrants rose to one million, of whom half did not have a legal status. State repression directed against illegalised immigrants facilitated the large-scale introduction of precarious jobs. Migrants found work above all in the building sector, agriculture, and tourism. Only in the second half of the 1990s did it become possible for some immigrants to apply for a legal status. Nevertheless, immigrants continued to face a religious-ethnocentric state racism. Those who were caught crossing the border illegally especially became objects of the bureaucracy's brutality and arbitrariness. On the other hand, EU funding for infrastructural development and farming contributed to economic growth in Greece. However, it did not solve the crisis of small-scale farming: monopolisation in both the food processing industries and food trade made the agrarian crisis a permanent topic in Greek domestic policy – since 1995 farmers protested almost annually with road blockades. Nevertheless, the food industry, an important sector in Greece, became stronger. Money from the structural fund was also used for extended investment into infrastructure, for example, for the motorway from Igoumenitsa on the Western coast to the Turkish border, for the *Rio-Antirio Bridge* linking the Western Peloponnes with the

mainland, the *Attican Ringroad*, Athens airport and the Athens metro. It is worth mentioning that these 'Megala Erga' (oversized projects) were built, mostly, by big German and French corporations. Offsetting the costs of these projects, but also the exorbitant military budget – from which, once more, the German and French weapons sector profited – against EU funding, it is obvious that the growing Greek budgetary crisis of the 2000s was the flipside of the export surplus of the Central European states.

Legitimation and Crisis of the Neoliberal Model

It is obvious that such an economic growth model – even if one ignores its disastrous ecological consequences – cannot last very long. Nevertheless, it was possible to organise political majorities for this neoliberal programme several times while radical opposition against it remained marginal. An important reason for the prolonged hegemony of the neoliberal block lies in the integration of the middle class and parts of the working class into this model of development. The middle class especially profited from economic growth. A symptom of this is the uncontrolled northward expansion of the suburbs of Athens: the forest fires occurring almost annually were and are side effects of this very growth strategy and symbols of its ecological destructiveness.⁴ It was migrants who were employed to build for upper

middle class families these homes, which devoured more and more of the landscape, and it was migrants who took jobs as domestic helps in these homes.

Structural corruption amongst the upper and middle classes in Greece reached kleptocratic dimensions in the 2000s. The state had always been seen as a cash cow for individual and collective enrichment. With the right-liberal government under Kostas Karamanlis, in power from 2004 to 2009, this enrichment took forms that totally undermined the legitimacy of state policy. The pillaging of the social insurance system, organised in cooperation with international financial actors, the appropriation of public goods, and collusion with the interests of foreign capital – in the case of Siemens generously rewarded – destroyed any rational conception of state action and provoked a general social revolt in 2008.

A New Social Movement

Since the 1990s, especially in the universities an anarchist new social movement developed, which deliberately distanced itself from those traditional Marxist organisational forms and action repertoires the labour movement had used over the previous 100 years. The reasons were obvious: on the one hand, the established trade unions failed to integrate both economically precarious, often highly qualified workers as well

as migrants. On the other hand, as already mentioned, with the collapse of the Eastern Bloc, Marxism had lost much of its power of persuasion. More importantly, traditional forms of industrial action turned out to be rather ineffective in a service sector organised along neoliberal lines. Being extremely heterogeneous, the anarchist movement thus became a magnet for young militants seeking new forms of resistance. Above all, two ideas were important: to practice grassroots self-organisation without formal hierarchies and to pursue direct action, i.e. a form of social (class) struggle without institutional regulation.

The new strength of anarchist ideas became obvious in the revolt of December 2008. While traditionally political parties and their organisations had played a central role in all sociopolitical struggles, this time no decisive influence of parties could be observed. The occupations of universities, schools, and public buildings occurred mostly without party political involvement while the influence of the anarchist groups was apparent. Furthermore, movement-oriented organisations of the extra-parliamentary Marxist left, which had increasingly appropriated grassroots democratic strategies themselves, also played a key role. The traditional leftwing parties – apart from the orthodox-communist KKE, especially SYRIZA (which had

Eurocommunist roots) – exerted only limited influence. Neglecting the traditional means of communication used by the labour movement, the anarchist groups primarily employed various electronic media. *Indymedia Athens* as well as a number of websites set up during the December revolt were of critical importance for the emergence of a counter-public.

Shocked by the strength of the December revolt, shortly after, in the wake of the financial and economic crisis 2008/09, the political class decided to take the bull by the horns and call for international support. Under circumstances resembling a *coup d'état* the Greek government signed a loan agreement with the states of the *Eurozone*, the IMF and the ECB, which according to Giorgos Kassimatis, an expert on constitutional law, abolished democracy and handed over sovereign rights.⁵ Parliament's decision making powers were de facto abolished and the representatives of the people transformed into an executive organ carrying out the austerity policies prescribed by the loan agreement. Supervision of these crisis policies became the task of the *Troika*, an institution controlled by the creditors and lacking any form of constitutional legitimacy. The turn to authoritarian statism that is observable everywhere, came in Greece without any democratic disguise.

Under this crisis regime, the organisational forms of the social movements, which had first been tested in 2008, proliferated. The occupation of public spaces in early summer 2011, inspired by the *Arab Spring* and the Spanish *Indignados*, linked a Marxist-oriented socioeconomic analysis of the crisis with ideas of grassroots organisation and collective direct action. As in other countries, social media became the crucial means for the formation of a counter-hegemonic public. The movement's growth and the state's increasingly repressive actions caused a crisis of legitimacy of all social and political institutions as well as the rapid erosion of the party system.⁶

However, paradoxically, SYRIZA succeeded in channeling the social energies again towards institutionalism. From 2011 to 2015, SYRIZA rose from a party receiving four per cent of the popular vote to the strongest force in parliament. One explanation for this is the party's strong orientation towards, and links with, the social movements in the 2000s, which for many people testified to its trustworthiness. Another is that the parliamentary-political route appeared to be the most realistic option to get rid of the austerity programme: most realistic, because the social movements had succeeded in destabilising the party system, but not in radically challenging economic relations. While many cooperative forms



General mass of Indignados in Athens Syntagma, Greece (30 June 2011)
Photo by [Ggia](#) (CC BY-SA 3.0)

of mutual self-help emerged, for example in the food, education and health sector, the economy's core areas remained by and large untouched. It is telling that, apart from the former building materials factory *Vio.Me* and a small woodworking company, there is no occupied plant in workers' control and, apart from the *Newspaper of Editors*, only the strongly fought-over public broadcasting service was temporarily owned by its employees. With the 'Solidarity for All' initiative, financed partly through MPs' salaries, SYRIZA tried to support the solidaristic economy. However, the integration of these initiatives and the social movements into the party's internal decision-making structures did not go very far. After the 2012 elections, which brought a governing majority within easy reach, the party concentrated on the parliamentary option. Mobilising and organising grassroots supporters receded more to the background. This change of priorities also applies to SYRIZA's left wing, which neither before nor after the party took over government in 2015 developed any serious strategic interventions of its own towards such goals. Even the grassroots initiatives themselves did not thoroughly criticise the narrowing of political focus onto the parliamentary arena. All invested their hope in a general election victory but hardly anyone discussed possible governmental strategies. The concentration of power in a progressively smaller circle of leaders is shown by

the fact that, after taking office, the government did not debate fundamental questions in public anymore, but decided on them by itself. The basic reason for the failure of the *Athens Spring* and the capitulation of the Greek government lies in this reintroduction of top-down decision making structures, which formed the flipside of the weakness of the social and political movements which, to make things worse, could rely on only very limited international support.⁷ A further escalation of the confrontation with the capital groups dominant in Greece and with the EU creditor states would have required the broad mobilisation and organisation of the population. The impulses and beginnings, that emerged in early summer 2011 turned out to be too weak and inconsistent to transform the traditional paternalist mentalities on the left.

The fixation on gaining parliamentary majorities within nation states has turned out to be a *cul-de-sac* – not only in Greece. In the face of complex social and economic crises, this model of achieving social emancipation via taking state power has definitely run its course. As consequence of the defeats of the previous decade of crisis, we now have to address the question of how to fight the socio-economic struggle in order to reach the complex goal of taking the means of production into social control. The lesson to be learned is that the

transformation of the capitalist mode of production needs more than just changed political majorities. In Greece as elsewhere the thwarting of collective processes of learning and emancipation has contributed to a strengthening of ethno-nationalist forces. Hence, the question as to how to overcome such blockages is currently of utmost importance. Until now, the social movements have not recovered from the capitulation of summer 2015. However, the search for innovative orientations and practical openings is treated with a new urgency on the left, as is shown by the recent interest in, and debates about, theorists such as Cornelius Castoriadis.⁸

Endnotes

- 1 Cf. Neni Panourigia: *Dangerous Citizens: the Greek Left and the Terror of the State*. New York 2009.
- 2 This dependency is all but new: traditionally, the state intervened in industrial relations, occasionally with open terror. This did not fundamentally change under PASOK. See Hubert Heinelt et al.: *Modernisierungsblockaden in Griechenland*. Opladen 1996, pp. 138ff.
- 3 Cf. Gregor Kritidis "Rise and Crisis of Anarchist and Libertarian Movements in Greece" in: Leendert van Hoogenhuijze et al. (eds.): *The City is Ours. Squatting and Autonomous Action in Europe*. Oakland 2014.
- 4 Cf. Costis Hadjimichalis: *Schuldenkrise und Landraub in Griechenland*. Münster 2014.
- 5 Giorgos Kassimatis: *Das inhumane Kreditsystem über Griechenland*. Münster 2018.
- 6 Cf. Gregor Kritidis: *Griechenland – auf dem Weg in den Maßnahmestaat? Autoritäre Krisenpolitik und demokratischer Widerstand*. Kritische Interventionen Bd. 13. Hannover 2014.
- 7 Cf. Gregor Kritidis: *Nach Syriza: Wie weiter für die europäische Linke?* <http://www.theoriekritik.ch/?p=2543>.
- 8 Cornelius Castoriadis (1922-97), Greek-French philosopher, co-founder of *Socialisme ou Barbarie*, reflected on ideas of libertarian socialism and emphasised dimensions such as autonomy, self-institution and creativity as basic elements of such a form of socialism.