

LEFT STRATEGY IN THE GREEK CAULDRON: EXPLAINING SYRIZA'S SUCCESS

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Wanderer, your footsteps are
the road, and nothing more;
wanderer, there is no road,
the road is made by walking.
By walking one makes the road,
and upon glancing behind
one sees the path
that never will be trod again.
Wanderer, there is no road –
Only wake upon the sea.

Antonio Machado, 'Proverbios y cantares', in *Campos de Castilla*, 1912

Fear and hope were the two dominant sentiments generated by the unprecedented recent electoral advances of the radical political coalition of the Greek left, Syriza. On the one hand there was fear of the established hierarchies of capital, the profit-making forces within Greece and abroad, as well as of important geopolitical interests. It was a fear that became more explicit after the May 2012 election (when Syriza had already tripled its vote to 16.9 per cent from 4.6 per cent in 2009), when the prospect of winning the June election seemed quite realistically to be around the corner. It was then that the international institutions displayed their concerns and fears about the rise of the left to power. This could be seen in their hinting at certain concessions with regard to Syriza's programmatic claims while at the same time waging a cheap propaganda war that intervened directly in the electoral campaign, alongside a degree of scaremongering by domestic business, intellectual and media elites that appeared to be inspired by the darkest sides of McCarthyism. The hope Syriza's advances inspired, however, in good part counterbalanced all this. Against the backdrop of the ongoing

dramatic consequences of the austerity policies, with new social calamities a daily experience, Syriza appeared more and more to be the only viable hope for an alternative way out of crisis. In fact, given that part of Syriza's plan was based on challenging both the predominance of neoliberalism and the democratic deficit in the European institutions, this feeling of hope spread among progressive forces on the continent, and beyond.

The goal of this essay is to contribute to a better understanding of Syriza so its experience may constitute a fruitful as well as inspiring case from which to draw lessons for socialist strategy today.¹ To this end, after some general comments on the latter I will turn to the Greek case, beginning with the left's evolution after the fall of the Junta in 1974, and especially its development since the collapse of 'actually existing socialism' in 1989. I will then try to show why Syriza's strategy was so successful as compared with other parts of the left movement, attempting to point out the characteristics of its strategy that may help overcome long-lasting disputes on the left and/or discover ways out of the impasse that the current crisis has imposed upon us. I will conclude with an outline of the challenges faced by Syriza, and more generally by the radical left in Greece in the current conjuncture, which are in fact similar to those faced by socialists worldwide.

STRATEGIZING ABOUT SOCIALISM

Strategizing about socialism is an old habit on the left. The resultant debates have often led to deep and paralyzing divisions among leftists. Indeed, for a long time they had even become an obstacle to making full sense of the dynamics of capitalism. However, the depth and the diversity of the current global capitalist crisis are placing the question of the socialist strategy in a more positive way at the centre of the left's agenda. This is not meant in the sense that the left is again being driven by the naïve idea that severe crises are necessarily conducive to radical social transformation. If the left has learned anything from the history of economic crises, it is that inadequate or uninspiring responses to those crises have not only led to political ineffectiveness but to huge political and ideological defeats.

The defeats of the 1970s and early 1980s contributed to the dispersion of radical left forces and consequently paved the way for neoliberal hegemony, the end result of which is none other than the current crisis. And as this crisis continues and even deepens, it is becoming increasingly clear, at least in the countries which find themselves at the epicentre of today's capitalist cyclone, that there is no room even for policies of limited/tactical reform. Governing parties of neo-social democratic or right-wing conservative orientations cannot even promise 'better days'. In fact, as aggressive austerity

policies have become the rule of thumb and recessions with double-digit unemployment rates have settled in, government policies do nothing but undermine even the reproduction of middle-class strata. The dynamic of the situation is such that for the first time in the post-war era, governments cannot guarantee a stable social consensus, and often cannot help but find refuge more and more often in coercion – as seen in the brutality with which the police have been confronting social protest in southern Europe. It is here, where the austerity policies are more acute, that capitalism appears to be testing its limits as well as the limitations of the democratic rule of law.

If the above is not an exaggerated portrait of today's sociopolitical dynamic, then one can reasonably claim that, at least for all of those who had never believed in, or had given up, the project of 'humanizing capitalism', today's deep capitalist crisis requires the development of radically new principles upon which the whole society is to be organized. This of course leaves us open to immeasurable uncertainty, but it should not paralyze us, as long as we continue to see the historical process as the outcome of socially multilayered and complex class conflicts; and as long as clear socialist strategic goals are at the top of the agenda – as they should be for any serious, non-sectarian, radical leftist organization today.

The insistence that another world is not only objectively plausible but also necessary should in practice guide tactics, organizational structure and everyday policy proposals. Given the increasingly undemocratic practices of governments today, it is more than ever the time to recompose and put forward a vision of social transformation where the emphasis on democracy will not just be a tactical reference to avoid the mistakes of authoritarian communist regimes, but also a strategic compass to navigate the wide variety of difficulties facing all the political forces that are committed to securing democracy through a radical political programme of structural reforms and popular mobilizations. Of course, whether we call that new world communism or socialism, let alone the exact wording of the policy proposals, what we advance will need to comply with the specific cultural contexts within which political discourses take on signifying meaning. Against the relief of these grand issues of socialist strategizing, let us turn to the Greek experience.

THE GREEK LEFT'S YEARS OF INCUBATION

Nineteen seventy-four was the turning point not only for the Greek left but also for the overall politics of the country. After the seven year dictatorship that concluded the already highly restricted democratic regime of the post-war and, in Greece, post-civil war decades, a genuine transition to democracy

was inaugurated. This gave the left a chance to develop freely, especially through the legalization of the parties of communist origin and orientation on the one hand, and on the other through the newly founded Pan-Hellenic Socialist Movement (Pasok). In the context of the post-dictatorship radical environment, and thanks also to its charismatic leader Andreas Papandreou, Pasok gave the impression that it was not only further to the left than its European counterparts of the time but even more radical than some of the country's communists. Pasok's 'socialism', a mixture of populist radicalism and Keynesian reformism, was far from a class-based form of politics (without at the same time excluding those who subscribed to the latter). This was enough, however, to co-opt a large segment of the traditional left's social base, although it was clear, at least relatively soon after they were elected to government in the early 1980s, that Pasok's leaders were anxious to embed themselves in the old clientelism of the Greek state, and that their real policy ambitions did not extend beyond that of mainstream social democracy at the time.² After a short interlude away from government, Pasok was elected again in 1993, but by this time Pasok bore almost no trace of the radical discourse it had embraced in the 1970s. And especially after 1996, under the leadership of Costas Simitis, who was a firm proponent of 'modernization', the orientation of 'new Pasok' (which dominated the country's politics until its defeat in 2004) was very close to that of Tony Blair's New Labour Party.³

On the other side of the left spectrum was the Communist Party (KKE), the heir to the 'glorious party' that led the resistance during the Second World War and which was defeated during the civil war that followed. During the Junta years, it had undergone a major crisis, including the break-away of the group that formed the KKE-Interior (1968), which developed as a Eurocommunist party, while the KKE itself remained a typical party of the Third International tradition and clung to its old Soviet-inspired communism even after the collapse of the Eastern European regimes, and even more strongly when the USSR itself collapsed in the early 1990s.⁴ In 1988, the two parties of the communist left and a number of other independent socialists formed Synaspismos (the Coalition of the Left and Progress – SYN). Three years later, after a series of contorted alliances that led to a disastrous attempt at an all-party 'ecumenical' government, the KKE left SYN, which in effect led to another split in the KKE since almost half of its central committee and thousands of its members remained in SYN. What has distinguished the KKE to this day, apart from a strong stand against the EU, is a simplistic and often conspiratorial political discourse. To the KKE, all other parties, including SYN, are treated as equally guilty of promoting capitalism and wanting to reproduce the system, and this provides the KKE

with the rationale for ruling out any possibility for cooperation, even in the trade union movement.⁵

In 2000, at the height of Pasok's modernizing project, a number of small leftist extra-parliamentary organizations and looser groups, as well as a number of independent activists, formed a network for exploring the possibilities for cooperation (The Space for Dialogue for the Unity and the Common Action of the Left).⁶ In 2004, under the pressure of electoral considerations associated with helping SYN secure the 3 per cent threshold for entering parliament, the Coalition of Radical Left (Syriza) was founded. SYN became pivotal to the Coalition's growth, not only due to its relative size but also by virtue of SYN's turn to the left under the leadership of Alekos Alavanos. A former member of the KKE and a member of the European Parliament, Alavanos crafted a strategy to make Syriza the unifying agent for a broad 'new left' – a presence so strong that it would no longer feel squeezed between Pasok's conformist governmentalism and the KKE's dogmatism. The strategy was founded on the principle of 'empowering the powerless', while at the same time trying to gain support from the labour and social movements, which the new leadership actively tried to strengthen by forming ties with them.

No less notably, Syriza organizationally evolved through providing increased opportunities for positions to the party's younger members, which was something quite unusual for the left of communist origin.⁷ The much criticized choice of Alexis Tsipras, then a thirty-two year old engineer, to stand as the party's candidate for mayor in the Athens municipal elections in the fall of 2006 especially exemplified this.⁸ The success of this initiative (Tsipras won an unprecedented 10.5 per cent of the popular vote) strengthened and stabilized Syriza's overall strategy, the political impact of which was demonstrated during the 2006-07 mobilization of students against a constitutional amendment that would allow the establishment of universities by the private sector. Syriza was pivotal in changing public opinion to such an extent that Pasok was forced to change its position on the issue, a development that annulled the government's efforts on the issue. Syriza's practice on this and other issues was especially important in indicating a clear departure from the traditional instrumentalism among parties on the left, completely preoccupied as they were with securing public office, while functioning inside the state institutions so as to separate their mobilization initiatives from their societal base.

By mid-2007, it was becoming clear that Syriza was much more confident about the outcome of the upcoming elections, as was indeed born out in September when Syriza won 5 per cent of the popular vote and 14 seats in

the 300 seat parliament.⁹ Six months later, at its 5th Congress in February 2008, Tsipras was elected SYN's leader over the moderate Fotis Kouvelis, while Alavanos however remained the leader of Syriza. Throughout that year, Syriza displayed a steady increase in its popularity, as all public opinion polls showed that the party had doubled its support since the 2007 election.¹⁰ Syriza had chosen a strategy which was open to the social movements as a model for both its survival and development. In fact, the symbiosis of the two cultures guaranteed the survival of the Coalition by forcing it to adopt the kind of functional and organizational practices that are closer to what has been called a 'mass connective party', in contrast with the old conception of the working-class 'mass party' whose main organizational trait was its capacity, or at least its ambitions, to unify all political, social, ideological and cultural anticapitalist expressions within it, and to channel them towards facilitating the leadership's goals of challenging or managing the affairs of the state. The main organizational trait of the 'mass connective party' would reflect its ambition not so much to unify but rather to connect in a flexible way the diverse actions, initiatives and movements that embody these expressions into a stable federation, and to concern itself with developing popular political capacities as much as with changing state policy.¹¹

Of course, at that point the 'mass' dimension of this organizational model appeared more to be wishful thinking than a realistic prospect. The KKE, on the other hand, chose to fortify itself against initiatives it could not control, and kept itself apart from the social movements, largely operating through a workers front organization (PAME) it had established in 1999.¹² Declaring that all the other parties are subservient to the EU's dictates, the KKE not only refused to engage in any common initiatives with other parties but avoided even simple communication or deliberations on procedural issues or simple formalities (e.g. the celebration of May Day, or the commemoration of the students' uprising against the Junta in 1973). This strategy of fortification sometimes became ridiculously sectarian as the KKE/PAME avoided mobilizing with, or even marching alongside, protesters who are not in their ranks.

In December 2008 the killing, completely without provocation, of a fifteen-year-old high school student by a Greek policeman triggered widespread protests and student occupations of high schools and universities throughout the country over a two-week period. This youth uprising exposed the deep differences between the two strategies of the Greek left.¹³ While Syriza actively supported the mobilizations, the KKE basically aligned itself with the puzzled establishment political forces, claiming that all the rebels were part of the 'black bloc' determined to recklessly set fire to Athens

and the other major cities. Even though it was severely attacked by the established media, and was well aware of the high electoral cost this might entail, Syriza continued to participate in the uprisings without trying to manipulate them. It criticized the insensitive political system for not ‘listening to the youth who are trying to tell us something’. However, the political cost of this, at least as measured by surveys of voting intentions, was felt immediately as Syriza’s popularity fell. This exposed deep divisions within SYN between the parliamentary-oriented modernizers and the movement-oriented left, and the subsequent bitter leadership contest between Tsipras and Alavanos resulted in Syriza’s poor performance in the May 2009 Euro-elections and the general elections in October of the same year (when its vote fell to 4.6 per cent).

Yet in the midst of a serious internal crisis that placed Syriza’s future in doubt, SYN decided to put together a new programme, which it hoped would be adopted when offered to all the members of Syriza.¹⁴ Later published as an impressive, almost 400 page book – unusual for a political party programme – it dealt with almost all aspects of public life as well as state policies, and was the collaborative product of hundreds of activists and experts from various constituencies both within and outside SYN and Syriza. In the 40-page introduction outlining the ideological coordinates, a vision of the ‘society of needs’ was juxtaposed to the existing ‘society of profits’, and a call for the reclaiming of ‘public space’ was put forward against encroaching privatization. Although this programme initially attracted little attention amidst an internal political crisis which exposed many organizational weaknesses, it was a strong indication of the strategic orientation of the huge majority of the activists in SYN. During that time there was another development in the ranks of the Greek radical left. In March 2009, some 10 small groups and parties formed another coalition, Antarsya (literally, the *Anti-Capitalist Left Cooperation for the Overthrow*). Composed primarily of university student activists in various communist organizations of orthodox Marxist, Trotskyist and Maoist backgrounds, as well of members of the relatively new rank-and-file unions outside the established bureaucracies of the official union structure of the country, it proved effective for activism in a broad range of mobilizations, but it never managed to achieve anything more than 1.8 per cent in the regional or general elections.

Yet if Antarsya saw Syriza as too moderate, it was in fact in protest against its ‘ultra leftist’ orientation that at SYN’s 6th Congress in June 2010, Fotis Kouvelis (who had been defeated by Tsipras in the SYN leadership race at the 2008 Congress) led 3,000 (out of 13,000) members of SYN and four (out of 14) MPs to form a new ‘modernizer’s party’, the Democratic Left

(DEMAR). Soon joined by a number of Pasok modernizers disenchanted with the George Papandreou government, DEMAR hoped to replace Pasok on the centre-left of the political spectrum. But without any substantial social roots, DEMAR had to rely almost entirely on the media for its appeal, although in collaboration with Pasok it had made some gains in the 2010 municipal and regional elections. And it was just at this time, amid the increased social polarization generated by the gathering eurozone crisis, when the conditions were being set for Syriza's great leap forward, which really changed the political map of the country.

THE MEMORANDA: SHOCK THERAPY AND RESISTANCE

No political strategy, no matter how innovative, comprehensive, well-planned and well-executed can be successful and effective if conditions are not conducive to it. There is no doubt that the overall social and political developments in Greece in the context of the 'Stability Programme' of the Memorandum of Agreement between the Pasok government, the European Central Bank (ECB), European Commission and the IMF, passed by parliament on 5 May 2010, were, to a very significant extent, responsible for Syriza's electoral advances. It was this event that signalled the developments that led to the radical change of the political balance of power in the 2012 election. The Memorandum promised Greece 110 billion euros over three years on condition that a set of draconian measures, all of which, even those presented as administrative reforms, led to an open attack on the public sector: wage cuts in the public sector of at least 20 per cent; extensive programmes for the privatization of public property (e.g. ports, Olympic Airlines, public transport); unprecedented deregulation measures for business activity mainly in transport and energy; dramatic cuts in social services, health and education, pension plans, in combination with an increase in indirect regressive taxes.

These measures were largely ineffective as a response to fiscal problems but they have had devastating social and economic effects. For example, recession became a permanent state of affairs (economic growth has been negative for five consecutive years and GDP is expected to approach a total decline of 7 per cent in 2012 alone); unemployment rose from 8.3 per cent to 12.6 per cent by the end of 2010 to reach an unprecedented high of 23 per cent by end of first quarter of 2012; bankruptcies of small shopkeepers reached a staggering 25 per cent; in Athens alone, 10 per cent of the population receives food from various social and charity institutions, another 17 per cent have found refuge for their everyday needs in the 'barter economy', and 60 per cent declare that they have drastically cut their food budgets; the number of homeless in Athens doubled, by the beginning

of 2012; the number of people at or under the poverty line increased by 50 per cent to some 30 per cent of the whole population. And as all this overwhelmed traditional kinship structures, still very important in Greece, the number of suicides rose by more than 40 per cent.

The dramatic loss of legitimacy of the Papandreou government led to its resignation and the formation of a new government led by Lucas Papademos, formerly the governor of the Bank of Greece and ex-vice chairman of the ECB. This government was supported by both Pasok and the right-wing New Democracy, which until then had not supported the Memorandum, as well as by LAOS, a nationalist party of the extreme right.¹⁵ It was a government of 'limited scope and duration', whose constitutional foundation was rather questionable. However, despite the 'unholy' political alliances on which it was based, the Papademos government managed to conclude a new Memorandum, which this time turned the screws on workers in the private sector by requiring severe cuts in minimum wages (22 per cent), as well as pensions and unemployment insurance, in addition to the virtual abolition of legalized collective agreements. The fiscal crisis was initially portrayed as an exclusively Greek phenomenon and the result of clientelism, the mismanagement of the public sector and the 'privileges' of the civil servants. But this new attack on workers in the private sector revealed that the previously dominant discourse, that the country's problem was a sick public sector, was false. It became almost a common understanding that the governments and the political forces behind them cared only about saving the banks and nothing else. This realization became the basis of a tacit but increasingly visible social alliance among the various classes and strata (workers in the public and private sectors, shopkeepers, small and even medium-sized businesses, independent professionals, pensioners, precarious labourers, the youth and the unemployed). It was this wide, diverse and even contradictory social alliance that set the stage for the new election the Papademos government called in May 2012, only seven months after it came into office.

The austerity measures required by the Memoranda had drastically undermined not only the main pillars of social inclusion but also the pillars of consent that had previously bound people to the old government parties, which in a cartel-like fashion have run the affairs of the Greek state. People already knew their politicians were deeply involved in cases of corruption, but they now saw them as undermining basic national dignity by acceding to the destructive conditions of the Memoranda and elevating the task force committee (the 'Troika') to the status of the real government. Thus, it was no surprise that despite the rusty and bureaucratized institutions of social

and political representation, Greek society displayed clear signs of political resistance.

Besides the numerous civil disobedience initiatives of workers (mainly but by no means exclusively in the public sector), as well as some scattered mobilizations in the agricultural sector, there have been 15 relatively successful calls for general strikes (most for 24 hours but two for 48 hours) since May 2010. The demonstrations that usually accompanied these actions often gathered big crowds, despite being confronted by severe coercive actions on the part of the police.¹⁶ The general strikes were initiated by the Pasok-dominated Federation of Labour and the Federation of Public Workers, but the vast majority of those who turned up to demonstrate were not union loyalists but precarious workers, rank-and-file militants, and members of public employees' unions who had disassociated themselves from Pasok.

Also indicative of the qualitative new dimension of the Greek people's resistance were the now famous mobilizations of the '*aganaktismeni*', i.e. the 'frustrated or indignant in the squares'.¹⁷ These movements, which appeared in almost every major city nationwide, used new means of political mobilization (including the internet) and developed a political language which was clearly hostile to the previously existing patronizing practices of the party system. In fact this hostility was frequently displayed by spontaneous verbal and even physical attacks on politicians of the governmental parties, which at times extended to representatives of the established trade unions and the KKE.

THE DYNAMICS OF SYRIZA'S RISE

The social and political developments caused by the Memoranda proved especially conducive to Syriza's rise, given its political background, orientation and strategy. Syriza's emblem is made up of three flags on a white background. The red flag symbolizes the tradition of the left movement, the green one represents the organizations concerned with the environment and the purple one symbolizes its commitment to an alternative politics and the struggle against patriarchy. The white background expresses its commitment to the unity of these struggles. Syriza is clearly committed to the radical transformation of society; however it is not willing to reiterate an historical concept of communism or socialism in order to define its own social vision. This is due not only to the diversity of groups and parties and the possible divisive consequences within, but also because such a definition would have undermined the everyday defensive struggles being waged now by a huge number of people under threat of extinction from a wide range

of social locales and backgrounds. Implicit in its very composition, and only occasionally made explicit, is Syriza's recognition that it draws on the overall heritage of the entire left, while at the same time leaving behind both the reformism of a bankrupt social democracy and the vanguardism of revolutionaries still dreaming of the storming of the winter palace. It hopes in this way to bridge the gap between reform and revolution and to define the radical transformation of capitalist society as a process of structural reforms directly connected to everyday struggles. As Syriza chose to deal with the challenge of political and ideological clarity in such fashion it seems to follow a strategy that elsewhere I have called a 'move against and beyond' many of the old left currents and traditions.¹⁸ This is not only essential for a creative, efficient and historically grounded socialist strategy but, as far Syriza is concerned, it is the key to developing a culture of tolerance among the previously competing left traditions. This has itself been necessary for creating the dynamic of diverse and innovative political activities in Greece, which has proved so important in the current economic, social and political crisis. In addition, moving against and beyond the left's entire tradition laid the foundation for transforming Syriza's particular organizational model of a 'mass connective party' into a genuine 'mass connective party'.

Syriza's membership includes many activists with a strong Leninist background (of various Stalinist, Maoist and Trotskyist varieties), who have great experience in organizing, a militant commitment to the cause of the left and are steeped in a political culture which makes them both loyal and reliable. These activists are also extremely important in the context of the strategy for the unification of the left in so far as they can objectively serve as a bridge to those who abandon the KKE and Antarsya. But in this context, moving 'against and beyond' means curbing tendencies to esoteric and almost masochistic splits, to narrow class and particularly economic reductionism, to instrumentalist understandings of political power and opportunist approaches to democracy and civil rights, not to mention a quasi-revolutionary rhetoric which often has paralyzing effects since it puts off every transforming reform until the apocalyptic D-Day of the grand revolution.

But much of Syriza's membership, in particular recently, also comes from the reformist left, which, despite its weak theoretical contribution, has a collective organizational culture useful both in the party building process and in attracting the people who abandon social democratic illusions. In this context, moving 'against and beyond' means confronting tendencies, held by more people than the others noted above, to naïve parliamentarism and governmentalism, to the loss of any sense of the potential of working classes as historical agents and to the embrace of a certain market rationality that

can lead to acceding to ‘competitive austerity’ as a modernizing ideal, not to mention a wholesale rhetorical dismissal of ‘populism’ which overlooks the fact that behind various populist practices are peoples’ real social needs and demands. In the current conjuncture, going ‘against and beyond’ means showing that the Memorandum is not simply a technical matter or merely an error of the governmental parties’ leaderships, but the outcome of a global predatory capitalism which cannot be amended.

We have already seen that the result of Syriza’s ‘shift to the left’ has been its involvement in the activity of social movements. Social movement activists and organizations within Syriza have offered their experience in organizing in the field, in providing new and innovative organizational and mobilization practices, which are particularly useful in the times of social upheaval that Greece is now experiencing. Within this context, Syriza’s challenge is to build on the experience of the social movements while also moving ‘against and beyond’ these movements’ hostility to or at least indifference towards the need for party organization; their penchant for a localism that ignores the importance of democratizing the central political institutions of the state; their limited and often single-issue approach to the political; and their so-called post-materialism which has led to self-indulgent practices or to communal isolationism. Although it was not a smooth process, Syriza managed to articulate and even capitalize on all these different backgrounds, traditions and experiences. While no one can pin down one key factor that allowed this to happen, it is possible to offer an analysis of how this was done, that is, to follow Syriza’s steps while it developed this admirable and unique dynamic. This involved practices of activism that brought the diverse background of its base together in everyday politics; the development of appropriate organizational structures; and the careful articulation of political cleavages and their transformation into a common call for structural change.

Syriza’s everyday practices of activism, despite their inherent tensions, are especially instructive for the left elsewhere. They involved, first of all, a genuinely militant yet discrete participation in the social movements, that is a type of participation which consciously avoided patronizing the spontaneity and the innovations of the movements and almost never substituted their dynamic with Syriza’s own political choices. To put it differently, Syriza’s activists have been present, if not protagonists, in every movement of resistance, even before the Memorandum, but never used the party banner in those movements. During the mobilizations in the city squares, this became even clearer as various organized parts of the coalition (e.g. especially the youth organization of Synaspismos) organized several educational meetings in order to adjust and respect the new concerns raised

by the activists in the squares. In addition, when the government decided to crush the movement violently, it was Syriza's membership and in many cases its prominent activists – not excluding Syriza's MPs – who provided their political, technical and legal support and expertise – and in some cases suffered the consequences of the state's coercive aggression.

Secondly, Syriza also avoided the habitual reservations of the left towards the official and bureaucratized institutions of political and social representation. Its involvement in them, however, did not reveal the usual governmentalist practice: it was an active, respectful yet militant presence in all the institutions of social and political representation, especially in parliament. Indeed, despite the small number of Syriza MPs, the party put together not only the most studious and efficient opposition to the government but at the same time brought marginal social demands and issues to the forefront of mainstream politics. In addition to their presence in parliament, the participation of Syriza's MPs in almost every social and political mobilization was real and visible. In fact, they frequently used their status to protect activists from police harassment and violence as well as to legitimate initiatives that were undertaken. Syriza members operating within the official trade union movement engaged in similar practices, thereby escaping the constraints of the tragically conventional and governmentalist structures of the union bureaucracy.

A third dimension of Syriza's strategic practice was its commitment to developing a programme, understood not as a fixed set of policies – 'a static and timeless text' – but rather as a political process – and even as such, not 'a process of simply managing the current conjuncture', but a 'continuous process' of movement building, designed 'to cut new paths ... preclude new dangers ... make use of the possibilities'.¹⁹ The programme, which was seen as a unifying factor, was the outcome of both experience from social struggles and experience and expertise acquired within the institutions of social and political representation. The concern to develop a concrete yet open programme, wherein the balance between various defensive struggles was articulated to the principles outlined in the party's alternative vision, had already been expressed in the programme put together by SYN as early as 2009. The programme functioned as a concrete alternative to governmental policies as well as offering a realistic perspective to those active in the movements and to the population at large. The programme was not only an answer to the attacks of the established political forces and to their propaganda but contributed to a framework where the idea of 'empowering the powerless' appeared realistic and the idea of the 'society of needs' versus the 'society of profit making' was concretized. Finally, the programme was

the linchpin between the active and militant presence of Syriza within and outside the public institutions and its claim to governmental power.

A fourth dimension of Syriza's strategic practice involved the call to take governmental power, based on the unity of the whole left. It was a call only put forward in a clear and intense manner by Tsipras a few months before the May election. This might have sounded unrealistic, however valiant and high-spirited, except for it having its roots in the widespread disenchantment of the population with the long-standing bipartisan political system. Tsipras's claim that Syriza intended to lead a government of the left involved the recognition that this system was finally losing all its legitimacy in the wake of the Memorandum, which had come to be seen by more and more Greeks, along with the series of laws that accompanied it, not simply as an extremely bad political choice with regard to the economic problems of the country, nor even just an attack on social rights, but as nothing less than 'treason' on the part of the political elite.

The effectiveness of this strategic practice, however, would not have been as successful if it were not for the key organizational traits of Syriza. Despite Syriza's many organizational deficiencies and internal frictions, the generic makeup of the Coalition necessitates a loose organizational structure very far from most versions of the mass Leninist-inspired party model that characterize almost all of the parties and organizations inside Syriza. The 'mass connective party' type of organization Syriza adopted could accommodate not only the diversity of the political entities already inside it, but also various constituencies outside the Coalition itself. Thus, although Syriza's loose organizational structure certainly had its limitations, its virtue was that it was precisely what allowed it to capitalize on the organizational assets of the Coalitions' members – from the Synaspismos offices in almost every town and city of the country to various other political networks with the experience in mobilizing strikes and occupations.

But no strategy, no matter how well articulated in everyday politics, and regardless of the appropriateness of the organizational model that accompanies it, can be successful without a clear call for an alternative future that resonates with people, that amounts to something that can correspond to an alternative answer to a pressing question or demand. This did not mean a concrete blueprint of a new social order of the kind left intellectuals sometimes try to develop to get beyond the often sectarian inclination of the radical left call for an abstract vision. Syriza opted for neither the abstract vision nor the concrete blueprint, both of which might have strong theoretical foundations but brings no immediate inspiration. Syriza put forward a threefold call that expressed urgent popular demands: the elimination of the Memorandum;

the call to end the ‘bipartisanship’ of the political system and everything it represented; and the call for the preservation of citizens’ dignity.

As the Memorandum was identified with austerity policies, Syriza’s call for their abolition was seen as clear and realistic. It made every other response seem either vague or unappealing, whether it was the call for ‘renegotiation’ by New Democracy and Pasok, for ‘gradual withdrawal’ by DEMAR or for ‘withdrawal’ from the EU and/or eurozone (Greece’s participation in which, to this day, enjoys an overwhelming popular support) made by the KKE and Antarsya. In a similar fashion, the call to defeat ‘bipartisanship’ was equally effective since all the problems of the country were attributed to the way the two governmental parties had run the country’s affairs. They were responsible for the phenomena of corruption, which were out of control, and for a system of mismanagement that had led to the dead end of the Memorandum. Thus, the anti-bipartisanship call functioned as the expressed demand for a new, more socially sensitive government. Finally, the call for dignity resonated not only in terms of how the aggressive austerity measures had disrupted the lives of so many individuals and families as well as overall social cohesion, but also in terms of the way these measures were imposed and supervised by the Troika, amounting to direct violation of national sovereignty and thus seen as an insult by the Greek people.

THE ELECTIONS: AN ANTICIPATED ‘MIRACLE’

By early 2012, the severe social effects caused by the policies of austerity and the role of mainstream political parties had made it clear that a fundamental rearrangement of the party system in Greece was on the cards. The political elites’ attempt to absorb popular discontent through the formation of a technocratic coalition government under the leadership of Papademos had clearly failed. The political dynamic of this situation led to rapid withdrawal of popular support from the dominant parties. This was evident not only from the people’s spontaneous harassment of the politicians that had supported the government’s policies, and the strengthening of various protest movements, but even from the growing distress of the backbenchers of the governmental parties and their subsequent attempt to organize new political parties.

As it was Pasok’s social base that became protagonists in these protests, it became clear to Syriza that it had to adjust to the new political dynamic. Thus, as various ex-Pasok groups and individuals (including some MPs) started to organize, Syriza struck an agreement with them which was signified by the change in name of the Coalition. Thus, the Coalition of the Radical Left (Syriza) appeared in the election as Syriza – United Popular Front. This extension was not an electoral and/or opportunistic move as it was in

complete accordance with the party's call for unity of the anti-Memorandum forces. In addition, as one can see from various interventions from rank-and-file Syriza activists, it was a demand from below and not a mere leadership agreement. Syriza did not approach the new 'comrades' with an attitude of 'I told you so'; but nor did it compromise its radical programmatic and political discourse. It thus avoided the traditional sectarianism of the self-righteousness of the radical left towards social democracy, and capitalized on the experience, the expertise and the popular appeal of former Pasok members, many of whom stood as candidates while others participated in the organization of electoral campaigns or contributed to the programme.

Syriza's campaign was not much different from its campaign in previous elections. It used the entire available infrastructure and the organizational capacity of all the members of the Coalition. Once again, local Synaspismos offices proved extremely useful. In almost every square Syriza managed to set up kiosks which functioned as meeting points for the electorate, the distribution of electoral leaflets and starting points for the daily door-to-door campaigns. While television debates at the leadership level were avoided by the dominant parties, innumerable hours of TV programmes were dedicated to the elections, where the representatives of Syriza were confronted with extreme hostility not only by their opponents but frequently by producers and journalists alike. This of course was something to be expected since 'the prospect of a radical left-reformist government ... [posed] a radical alternative to austerity and the crisis of capitalism has provoked panic among the Euro-elites and the Greek ruling class'.²⁰ In these debates Syriza's representatives displayed a relative weakness since they were not trained to confront such attacks. It was there that Syriza's multifaceted background and loose organizational structures revealed their limitations, on which its opponents were happy to capitalize.

In the June election, when Syriza's victory was a real possibility, almost all the other parties made Syriza the main target of their electoral campaign. This included DEMAR and the KKE ('Don't trust Syriza' was one of the KKE's main electoral slogans). The DEMAR and KKE campaigns objectively undermined the unquestionable popularity of the call for 'unity of the left' and the formation of an anti-Memorandum progressive front. This revealed a serious contradiction in Syriza's strategic call for the unity of the left, as it cast a serious doubt upon the realism of this call. Antarsya was less critical of Syriza, especially during the June election. Its main criticism, apart from that Syriza's programme was neither sufficiently 'anti-capitalist' nor 'anti-Euro', was that Syriza's repeated declaration that its intention was to keep the country in the eurozone but 'not at all costs' was not convincing.

Even if Syriza's electoral campaign was not all that different from previous ones, it was more effective this time because it could now use the experience, the know-how and the techniques of political mobilization acquired in its involvement in the social movements more than before. These new practices facilitated its discourse and its initiatives to bring to the fore the demands of the constituencies that had been harder hit by the austerity policies. An additional factor in making its electoral campaign more effective was that just as the other parties – especially the governmental ones – now avoided the traditional open rallies in major cities (due to their fear of small turnouts and the possibility of popular harassment), Syriza organized many open rallies just about everywhere.

Given the conditions in which the June 2012 election took place, the result was not a great surprise. Syriza secured 27 per cent of the vote, less than three percentage points behind New Democracy which was forced to form a coalition government with Pasok (12.5 per cent) and DEMAR (6.2 per cent).²¹ The voters who defied the scare tactics of those within the country and abroad, and who pinned their hopes on Syriza to find a way out of the plight of austerity policies, saw the result as a defeat. However, there is no doubt that it was a victory for the left, with far-reaching effects felt well beyond the Greek borders. Many commentators think that Syriza's electoral achievement was merely circumstantial – a result of the social consequences of austerity and the novelty of Tsipras's appeal alongside the mistakes of the dominant elites who went overboard with their slanderous attacks on Syriza. However, such a verdict is belied by the positive motivations of Syriza's voters. Thirty-eight per cent supported it primarily because 'it expresses the demand for change', a further 19 per cent because it was 'against bipartisanism' and yet another 14 per cent because it 'articulates in an optimal way the hope for better days'.²² Moreover, 56 per cent of Syriza's voters declared that they agreed wholeheartedly with its ideology and programmatic principles and proposals, which clearly pertain to its radical left orientation (e.g. nationalization of the banks, taxation of high income earners and big business, especially for ship-owners, etc).

Syriza's vote was unusually well distributed geographically, so much so that its MPs (71 in total) now represent almost all constituencies and regions of the country. There was no constituency in the entire country where less than 14 per cent voted for Syriza, while in some of them its support was as high as 38 per cent, especially in working-class neighbourhoods. No left-wing party in the country's history, including the seminal performance of the Unified Democratic Left (EDA) in 1958 (24.4 per cent), had managed such a success since the civil war, as left-wing support was usually based in

urban centres and in a few areas with strong left-wing traditions. That said, Syriza's vote was clearly class based, and what is notable about this was the close alignment of the social distribution of its vote with the programmatic and the political base upon which this vote was mobilized. Its support came not only from public employees (32 per cent), but also from private sector wage earners (33 per cent), from the unemployed (33 per cent) and from precarious workers (27 per cent). At the same time Syriza's support proved that a social alliance has been in the making, as 32.6 per cent of small shopkeepers and artisans and 26 per cent of professionals voted for it.²³ Furthermore, distribution of the vote in all age brackets from 18 to 54 favoured Syriza relative to New Democracy. Among the electorate between the ages 18–24 Syriza received 45 per cent; between the ages 25–34 it received 30.1 per cent; between 35–44 it received 30.7 per cent; between 45–54 it received 32.4 per cent; but in the ages between 55–64, it received only 24.1 per cent, while among all those older than 64 years its support was a modest 13.8 per cent.

No one within Syriza believes that the party has reached a plateau. Yet everyone in it also knows that its rapid electoral advance was not as smooth as its outcome suggested. The many cases of lack of coordination, the loose organizational structures and the consequent elevation of the Tsipras leadership to the almost exclusive source of decision-making power during the campaign are problems that require immediate attention. In addition, the fact that the huge number of citizens who supported Syriza and contributed to the campaign come from diverse constituencies and often contradictory backgrounds poses a major challenge in terms of how they can be included in the organizational structure in such a way as to capitalize upon their diverse political cultures and capacities. Lastly, Syriza has to coordinate its presence in parliament and promote among its new MPs the political and organizational culture that characterized its practices so far. This is not an easy task given how being the official opposition party will draw it into more conventional parliamentarist concerns and practices, with all the constraints that go with this for a mass connective party that has at the same time to maintain its presence in the social field and be even more effective in building solidarity networks to support the victims of austerity.

Shortly after the June election, Alexis Tsipras put forward a fairly concrete organizational plan to the plenary session of the Central Coordinating Committee of Syriza. The plan calls for transcending coalition structure via direct membership of Syriza itself through its local branches and union, student and professional organizations, with a founding Congress of the new and unified Syriza scheduled for the spring of 2013. Meanwhile,

there is already extensive speculation that the current government will be short-lived. In this context, the likelihood that Syriza's intention to secure governmental power will quite likely soon be realized is comforting to its base, which is hoping for radical change. However, the political and social dynamics of the country, and especially Syriza's organizational weaknesses, have led to scepticism with regard to its future. In this regard three possible scenarios have been voiced. The first scenario posits that within the political and social dynamic of Greek society Syriza cannot become a majority party and the best it can hope for is to become the leading and well-established major opposition, like the Italian Communist Party in the 1970s. The second scenario denies this but claims that Syriza will eventually be dominated by its newer membership who came from Pasok and that it will develop into a new social democratic party for the twenty-first century. This scenario rests upon two mistaken assumptions: first, that ex-Pasok supporters are somehow politically fixed forever in positions to the right of Syriza; and second, that the reformism of a typical social democratic strategy can constitute a lasting response to the severe problems of Greek society. The third, and to me the most likely, scenario is that the social and political shortcomings of the austerity policies will soon create conditions conducive to Syriza's coming to power, and that when it does it will not look anything remotely like a typical social-democratic government.

STRATEGIC LESSONS FROM GREECE

Socialism needs once again to be put on the political agenda. But strategizing for socialism in the twenty-first century requires a critical evaluation of all the previous efforts as they were historically articulated by all traditions – from the Fabians to the Leninists. This is a critical discussion and one in which the left everywhere must engage soon, and the experiences of the Greek radical left may provide some lessons and perhaps a sense of direction. No matter what the future holds for Syriza, its successful strategy to this point may be useful for those trying to think about socialist strategy elsewhere, provided it takes account of the following points:

1. Prefabricated models have very little relevance to the actual circumstances of any given social formation. Usually these 'models' (in effect reflecting an idealism inspired more by Plato than by Marx) overlook the dynamics of ever-developing contradictions, while at the same time producing paralyzing divisions stemming from steadfast adherence to specific radical theoretical traditions.
2. The actual social dynamics going on in any conjuncture should always

be at the heart of socialist strategy. While social mobilizations should be supported regardless of their possible political cost, they should never be manipulated. They should always be treated with respect and yet without the kind of glorification that can only lead to a problematic populism.

3. All working people (public and private sector wage earners, part-timers and full-timers and the precarious) have to be the primary social base for socialist strategy. The possible and always necessary social alliances are the result of conjunctural dynamics and cannot be theoretically predetermined.

4. A concrete programme of structural changes is important to disseminate the left's values and social principles, and to provide perspective for how the social base of the socialist project can be empowered. But too great an emphasis on concrete policy proposals risks rendering the programme too technocratic, and tends to alienate people, since it will be reminiscent of the dominant type of party politics.

5. Participation in the institutions of political and social representation is important; however, this should not be undertaken in a sterile fashion which reproduces formalism and governmentalism. On the contrary, radical left representatives should systematically promote social concerns and demands within these institutions.

6. The left should aim at establishing and consolidating the people's trust and should eliminate the usual mainstream parties' double talk: one before and another after the electoral campaigns. Discursive consistency is a great asset.

7. A socialist strategy, no matter how small the political party, should entail the realistic prospect of capturing governmental power. This will require the abandonment of the *governophobia* that is so common on the radical left.

8. A socialist strategy should not seek the expansion of its support by moving to the right. More than ever before, under today's 'total capitalism', tactical moves towards the exhausted 'alternatives' of the modernizers of neoliberalized social democracy can only lead to strategic defeats.

9. The radical left should not be indifferent to all 'modernization'. Given the positive connotation of the term, the radical left should redefine it by putting societal/class concerns and demands at the centre of political, institutional and administrative reforms.

10. Internationalism for the radical left is a genetic trait. This ideal is often put into practice through participation in existent supranational institutions; however, a socialist strategy should not see these institutions in an essentialist fashion and insist on 'participation at all costs'.

11. Finally, no crafting of a socialist strategy can have any meaning without

the parallel building of a political party. But since the socialist party is effectively the seed of the polity and the social organization to be achieved in the future, close adherence to democratic process in party building is as essential as is building the strong yet flexible organization which can coordinate and translate the social struggles into political effectiveness. Here the idea and the practices as well as the actual shortcomings of the mass connective party will be more than useful.

NOTES

- 1 The following analysis is mainly the result of accumulated experience more as an activist than as an academic. It is an attempt to make sense both of developments in a number of locales where I found myself in last ten years (itself the overall accumulated experience from my involvement in left-wing politics for some four decades now) and of the various theoretical and political exchanges that illustrate the problematique of the left since the crisis broke out. More specifically, it takes into consideration the developments on the Greek political scene, especially on the left, the exchanges that took place in the Theory Department and in the Programme Committee of the Alliance of the Radical Left (Synaspismos), in the executive committee of the Nicos Poulantzas Institute and the experience from the various meetings of *Transform* as well as from my experience as an active participant of the Greek, European and World Social Forums, where I was lucky enough to participate. In that sense I have benefited, both directly and indirectly, from a number of men and women with whom I have shared efforts, struggles and dreams. Last but not least I am particularly grateful to Costas Eleftheriou and Helga Stefansson for their crucial editorial advice, assistance and encouragement.
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- 11 M. Porcaro, 'A Number of Possible Developments and the Idea of Connective Party', Turin, May 2011, mimeo; see also M. Porcaro, 'The Third Actor: Moderate Left, Radical Left and the "New Global" Movement', in Michael Brie and Cornelia Hilderbrandt, eds., *Parties of the Radical Left in Europe: Analysis and Perspectives*, Berlin: Karl Dietz Verlag, 2005, pp. 33-41.
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- 19 These were the words used by Giannis Dragasakis, the venerable economist who was coordinator of the programme committee, in unveiling the economic programme for the June 2012 election campaign. See *Avgi*, 3 June 2012, available in English as 'The Economic Government Program of Syriza – United Social Front' at <http://www.left.gr>.
- 20 MacFhearraigh, 'Syriza', p. 103.
- 21 The other parties who passed the 3 per cent threshold and entered parliament in the June election were the Independent Greeks, who got 7.51 per cent, Golden Dawn (Chrisi Avgi) with 6.92 per cent and the KKE with 4.5 per cent.
- 22 G. Mavris (interview), *Epohi*, 24 June 2012.
- 23 C. Vernadakis, *Avgi*, 24 July 2012.