

# THE GREEK CRISIS AS CONCRETE UNIVERSAL

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## THE GREEK CRISIS AS CONCRETE UNIVERSAL: ON THE IMPOSSIBILITY OF REFORM AND THE IMPASSE OF SUBJECTIVITY

In our times we can neither endure our faults nor the means of  
correcting them.

— *Livy*

From the rebellion of students and the anti-parliamentary left in December of 2008 to the ongoing economic and political crises (including Syriza's rise to power as well as the refugee crisis), Greece has consistently been headline news in recent years. With each new round of developments, the situation in Greece seems to become more dire and its global importance more acute. Indeed, Greece is now presented as a key cause of everything from the possible collapse of the euro and the vicissitudes of Wall Street to the electoral rise of the far right and a potentially miserable Christmas.<sup>1</sup> Greece, less than 2% of the EU economy, appears to many as the catalyst of European decline and global capitalist crisis.

If the situation in Greece were peculiar to Greece itself, then it would hardly be a threat to European order or to global capitalist accumulation. Indeed, a central fallacy in attempting to understand the current crisis has been to paint Greece (and, to a lesser extent, its fellow 'PIGS') as an outlier, a special, abnormal, case.<sup>2</sup> This essay takes the opposite standpoint; that the economic and political situation in Greece is at the vanguard of the political and economic dynamics that characterize the current moment in global capitalism. The essay argues that Greece is so central in the economic and political dilemmas of the moment precisely because of what is common, not different, with the rest of Europe as well as contemporary capitalist societies

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<sup>1</sup> One headline asked 'Did the Greeks just steal Christmas?', <http://money.msn.com/exchange-traded-fund/did-the-greeks-just-steal-christmas-mirhaydari.aspx>

<sup>2</sup> Common arguments include the points that Greeks are unusually corrupt and/or lazy, as with Angela Merkel's 2011 assertion that "We can't have a common currency where some get lots of vacation time and others very little". Even Greeks have tended to take a similar position. Prime Minister George Papandreou, in a 2009 speech to European Union delegates, declared, "Our basic problem is systemic corruption". In a 2011 interview with a Turkish reporter, Theodoros Pangalos, as Deputy Prime Minister, attributed the economic situation in Greece to the 'lazy lifestyle' of Greeks.

more generally. Although there is no doubt that Greece is a singular case, it is singular as an articulation of much more universal forces and tendencies. This was the main point of Marx's warning to German readers of *Capital: "de te fabula narrator"* (the tale is told of you)! Although England featured as the key illustrative case in Marx's work, he cautioned German readers that to think of England as some anomalous case would be to severely misread the scale of the forces in play; England was, Marx understood, a precursor of what the future held for Germans and many many others. So it is today with Greece.<sup>3</sup>

This essay will examine two critical elements of the current political conjuncture through an analysis of capitalism and the state in Greece. First and foremost, it will examine the current crisis of the state as a political form that is capable of marshaling mass support and agreement among its citizens and as a regulator of capitalist accumulation. Secondly, the inability of the left or other progressive forces to address this crisis or to mount any series challenge to capitalist hegemony will be examined. Indeed, that even in Greece, which is in most ways a best-case situation for the left within Europe, the parliamentary and extra-parliamentary lefts have proven to be incapable of presenting a coherent political alternative to the existing order is a key analytical and political puzzle.

## GREECE AS SYMPTOM OF EUROPE

The observation that developments in Greece are tightly bound to developments in Europe and beyond is nothing new. Without doubt, we could take this as an axiom that is true for most all societies. However, the particular way through which Greece has been a part of Europe and how this has changed in recent years is of great significance.

The emergence of Greece itself is directly tied to the European project and the myths and economic developments that constituted it. On one hand, the idea of 'Greece' emerged as a core myth regarding the origin of Europe and

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<sup>3</sup> Nicos Poulantzas had made a similar point regarding the political upheavals of the 1970s; "Greek developments, in fact, are simply the counterpart of what is taking place in France or Germany", *The Crisis of the Dictatorships*, London 1976, p. 159. As a general methodological principle, dam Przeworski and Henry Teune very clearly articulated the need to eschew the easy path of assuming uniqueness as an explanatory standpoint; "whenever there is a system specific factor that seems to be necessary for explanation, the conclusion should not be that systems are unique but rather that it is necessary to identify some general factors so far not considered", *The Logic of Comparative Social Inquiry*, New York 1970, p. 13.

the principles of the Enlightenment. As Stathis Gourgouris has explicated, the Greek national project emerged as a symptom of enlightenment thought.<sup>4</sup> The idea of Greece became the ego-ideal of the European spirit, a construction perhaps best represented by Wilhelm von Humbolt's *Essays on the Greeks* but developed in countless works, from Herder and Hegel to Delacroix and Byron. Greeks were presented as the perfect people, brave, principled, intelligent, neither too short nor too tall, neither too fat nor too skinny.<sup>5</sup>

Enlightenment values and this romantic image of Greece were taken up by Greeks within the cultural and commercial centers throughout Europe. Thinkers such as Adamantios Korais and Rigas Feraios created a new, Greek, national vision based on these more general European intellectual and political principles. Arguing against the intellectual and cultural domination of the anti-rationalist, anti-enlightenment, Orthodox Church and its clerics as well as against the political domination of the Ottomans, these new national thinkers advocated the creation of a Greece that was capable of aspiring to its classical values and achievements.

As philosophical and literary works in Greek began to appear and as wealthy merchants helped finance this Greek Enlightenment and spread its message throughout Europe and what was to become modern Greece, the situation within the Ottoman Empire was in decline. Traditional arrangements between Greek peasants and the local Ottoman administrators and tax farmers had been unraveling.<sup>6</sup> From the late 16th century onwards, the *timar* system of land distribution and taxation had been gradually replaced with large scale private land holdings, the *tsiflik* system, and a more nebulous system of tax farming which was much more autonomous from central Ottoman authority. This transformation coincided with the growing emergence of 'cash crops', a result of the growth of industry, trade, and urbanization within the core of Europe. As the value of the cotton needed for the mills and that of the grains needed to feed the expanding urban populations grew, so too did the level of exploitation of peasants by the local *tsiflik* owners and tax farmers since they were no longer bound by traditional rates of taxation or

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<sup>4</sup> Stathis Gourgouris, *Dream Nation: Enlightenment, Colonization, and the Institution of Modern Greece*, Stanford 1996.

<sup>5</sup> Adamantios Korais recounts the reaction when, in applying for a security pass in Paris, he identified himself as a Greek: "the eyes of everyone present were fixed upon me, some approached me as if to convince themselves that a Greek was the same as any other human," *Lettres Indedites de Coray a Chardon de la Rochette 1790-1796*, Paris 1877, p. 122.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. L. S. Stavrianos, 'Antecedents to the Balkan Revolutions of the Nineteenth Century', *The Journal of Modern History*, December 1957, pp. 335-348.

closely controlled by central Ottoman authorities. The discontent that this over-exploitation engendered was as fundamental as the ideas of the Greek enlightenment for the emergence of Greece. Indeed, the bands of brigands that emerged as a response to the growing commercialization of agriculture and exploitation of peasants formed the foundation of the rebel forces that opposed the Ottomans and eventually resulted in an independent Greece.<sup>7</sup>

In this way, Greece has from its very beginning been in an extremely dependent relationship to Europe: its trade and agricultural production at the service of European interests; its merchant classes mainly centered in the commercial capitals of the Europe and Asia Minor; even its national myths imported from Germany and France.<sup>8</sup> Accordingly, the development of Greece since its independence has followed a path that, in great part, has been structured by these dependencies and the ways that they shaped the class structures and political institutions within Greece (complete with imposed monarchs and high interest-rate sovereign loans but also with unusually high levels of education and very egalitarian distributions of land).<sup>9</sup>

### GREECE AS VANGUARD OF EUROPE: FROM COMPRADOR CAPITALISM TO GLOBALIZATION

Recent events, however, suggest that Greece's position relative to political and historical developments in Europe and beyond has been transformed. From the development of capitalism and the emergence of a national state to the institution of democracy and Keynesian regulations, Greece was always true to its peripheral/dependent position as a 'historical laggard', especially when it came to the economy. Of course, it is still the case that Greece is in a dependent 'peripheral' position relative to the core of European political power and transnational capital; this is especially true in the context of

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<sup>7</sup> For more on the role of brigands see John Koliopoulos, *Brigands With a Cause: Brigandage and Irredentism in Modern Greece 1821-1912*, New York 1987.

<sup>8</sup> For a detailed analysis of dependency and underdevelopment in Greece, see Nicos Mouzeils, *Modern Greece: Facets of Underdevelopment*, New York 1978.

<sup>9</sup> This essay only briefly touches upon the historical development of political order and social class in Greece. For those interested in further analysis, there are three foundational Marxist studies that attempt to understand the political, economic and cultural development of modern Greece: Nicos Svoronos' *Historie de la Grece Moderne*, Paris 1953; Kostas Vergopoulos' *Le Capitalisme Difforme et la Nouvelle Question Agraire: L'Exemple de la Grece Moderne*, Paris 1977; and Konstantinos Tsoukalas' *Dependance et Reproduction: Le Role de l'Appareil Scolaire dans une Formation Transterritoriale*, Paris 1975.

the euro zone and fiscal policies.<sup>10</sup> What has changed, however, is that developments in Greece no longer appear as lagging or as occurring in the margins of either Europe or the global economy. Developments in Athens today cause direct reverberations in Berlin, Paris, Beijing, and New York; there has been a curious transformation of Greece from quaint backwater to historical vanguard.

There are two key economic dimensions of Greek society that had set it apart from more 'advanced' capitalist societies. The comprador character of capitalism in Greece and the relative paucity of the private sector labor market. Greece has served as little more than, as Poulantzas termed it, a 'staging post' in the global circuit of capital.<sup>11</sup> Key industries such as shipping, mining, textiles, and tourism have had little to no vested stakes in domestic markets and economic development. Capitalism in Greece has always been largely indifferent to Greece itself, being much more bound to international movement rather than national developments.<sup>12</sup> The private sector economy tended to be composed of small, usually family run, firms and never led to a very large demand for waged labor.<sup>13</sup> Amazingly, self-employment (typically estimated to be about 30 percent the total labor market in Greece) is more common in Greece than private sector employment is. In fact, according to the OECD, Greece has the highest level of non-agricultural self-employment in the world.<sup>14</sup> Relative to the EU averages, Greece has much more than twice the average rate for self-employment, many times higher than the rates of 4-7% found in France, Germany, and the Scandinavian countries. The percentage of the labor force involved in agriculture is also comparatively high (although currently at historic lows for Greece) at 12-13%, and most estimations are that about 25% of the labor market is fully or partly employed by the public sector. If we also exclude those who work in family

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<sup>10</sup> Cf. Costas Lapavistas, Annina Kaltbrunner, Duncan Lindo, J. Mchell, Juan Pablo Painceira, Eugenia Pires, Jeff Powell, Alexis Stenfors and Nuno Teles. 'Eurozone Crisis: Beggar Thyself and They Neighbour.' *Journal of Balkan and Near Eastern Studies*, No. 4 2010, pp. 321-373. The way that the IMF and the EU have imposed austerity measures in Greece underscores Greece's subservient, dependent, position.

<sup>11</sup> Poulantzas defined the comprador bourgeoisie as "that fraction whose interests are entirely subordinated to those of foreign capital, and which functions as a kind of staging-post and direct intermediary for the implantation and reproduction of foreign capital" *The Crisis of the Dictatorships*, London 1976, p. 42.

<sup>12</sup> This is not to discount the political significance of the domestic bourgeoisie and its role in transforming Greece into a modern consumer society.

<sup>13</sup> Cf. James Petras, 'Greek Rentier Capital: Dynamic Growth and Industrial Underdevelopment.' *Journal of the Hellenic Diaspora*, No. 2 1984, pp. 47-58; and Constantine Tsoukalas, 'Modernization and its Discontents.' *Journal of Modern Hellenism*, Winter 1996, pp. 185-218.

<sup>14</sup> OECD, *Labour Force Statistics*, Paris 2005, p. 18.

run enterprises (another 6-8%), the remaining total for the private sector labor market is, at best, only about 25% of the entire labor force.<sup>15</sup>

These two basic points, limited private sector job creation and a marked indifference of capital to questions of domestic welfare and development as well as a great ability to circumvent national taxes and regulations, are central for understanding some key dimensions of the current debt crisis in Greece. As we have been told many times since the debt crisis developed, Greece has been especially inept at collecting taxes and Greeks seem particularly averse to paying taxes. However, we should not take this as some sort of cultural anomaly or difference, Greeks being particularly dishonest or corrupt. With such a large percentage of the population being self-employed it is simply that there is much more potential in Greece to not fully disclose your income. For a kiosk owner, plumber, or taxi driver in Athens or Stockholm or Paris, one would expect that there would be some inherent underreporting of income, it is simply impossible to fully monitor and tax so many cash transactions. However, when the self-employed are six times greater in Greece than in France or Sweden, the impact of this cheating on taxes is much higher. Similarly, one also finds large corporate interests, from shipping and banking to energy and telecommunications, able to circumvent and shape national regulatory schemes and tax codes. The only consistent source of tax revenue has been waged, private and public, workers as well as consumption and luxury taxes.<sup>16</sup>

The static character of the private sector job market created a key additional problem given the attempts to 'converge' the Greek economy with that of the rest of the Europe. A central and explicit dimension of Greek policies from the mid-1990s onwards was to bring the Greek economy and labor market more in line with European norms.<sup>17</sup> Part of that involved changes in policies that clearly marked a turn away from agriculture as a core economic activity in Greece (which, as late as the 1960s, had constituted the largest segment of the labor market). Through the elimination of most agricultural subsidies and the loss of competitive advantage in many agricultural products

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<sup>15</sup> Although the percentage of the labor force in agriculture and in public employment has changed over time, the private labor market has remained consistently small. See Konstantinos Tsoukalas, (in Greek) *State, Society, and Employment in Post-war Greece*, Athens 1987.

<sup>16</sup> Given the difficulties in imposing income taxes in Greece, in earlier decades the state had imposed high import tariffs and a monopoly on such consumer basics as salt, matches, and playing cards as key sources of revenue. Both of these are obviously not possible in the context of the EU.

<sup>17</sup> There is a huge literature on this question of economic convergence within the euro zone. The current crisis should leave little doubt, however, that economic convergence has not followed from the introduction of a common currency.

through the introduction of the euro, there was a conscious attempt to shrink agriculture and grow the private labor market. Although the former was successful, the later never took place. One key source of economic decline in the last ten years has been the inability of the private sector to increase its percentage of the labor market. Policy makers from Costas Simitis to the present demonstrated a volunteeristic faith in 'convergence' and the magic of the marketplace to create jobs, as if the existing economic relations could be transformed through wishful thinking. PASOK under Andreas Papandreou attempted to build a welfare state in Greece at exactly the point when the economic boom of the 60s and 70s was drawing to a close, severely limiting the extent of welfare state provisions and also significantly increasing levels of public debt. PASOK under Costas Simitis repeated the pattern of unfortunate timing by attempting to transform the labor market in a moment when capitalism, at least within 'advanced' societies, was no longer creating jobs.<sup>18</sup>

Both of these characteristics, the comprador nature of capitalism in Greece and the inability of capitalism to create jobs, are not at all out of step with broader trends within Europe or with capitalist societies more generally. The Greek situation is still extreme but it is now at the forefront of how capitalism is developing and how globalization has transformed national economies into increasingly comprador forms, with short-term speculation and transnational movement paramount over questions of national development or long-term stability and growth. The ways that capital in Greece had always been detached from territoriality and, more importantly, disembedded from society are now becoming so common that this question of the deterritorialization of capitalism and the increasing disembeddedness of markets is the most pressing and challenging aspect of how globalization is transforming capitalist societies.<sup>19</sup> From the proliferation of offshore banking, to the elimination of a great many trade barriers, the digitization of information, the reduction of transportation costs due to containerized shipping and mechanization, and beyond, capitalism greatly increased its capacity to erase and ignore local efforts to curtail and tame it.

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<sup>18</sup> On the growing incapacity of capitalism to create jobs, see Stanley Aronowitz and William Defazio, *The Jobless Future: Sci-Tech and the Dogma of Work*, Minneapolis 1994.

<sup>19</sup> Indeed, one consistent thread in discussions as varied as those framed in the problematics of 'empire' to those of 'financialization' and 'liquid modernity' is this loss of embeddedness, the figure of the 'nomad' being particularly salient.

Karl Polyani had famously argued that the liberal dream of a completely autonomous, disembedded, market had not been realized nor could it have been realized.<sup>20</sup> He noted that without social regulations and limits, capitalism would destroy the natural and social environments that made it possible. Today, we face the sober realization that this is exactly what we may be witnessing.

It is certain that the disembedded ways with which capitalism in Greece developed and its dependency upon external powers are key elements in understanding the current crisis. However, we find that even economies of the capitalist core, from Japan and the United States to Belgium and France, also face significant problems regarding their levels of public debt. Just as Greece has problems collecting taxes from capital, so do the states of the capitalist heartlands as well. Just as Greece faces severe limitations in continuing its existing (already quite paltry) system of public services and social safety nets, so it also is throughout the capitalist world to one degree or another. More to the point, the debt of Greece does not necessarily translate into the wealth of France or Germany. Similarly, the German insistence on austerity in Greece (and beyond) is in many ways irrational from the standpoint of its national economy, dependent as it is on exports and deficit spending elsewhere. Traditional explanatory models that emphasize imperialism and the global division of labor may be necessary but are clearly insufficient for understanding the current moment of globalized capitalism and the significance of Greece within it. Things are much more nebulous, capital increasingly detached from national space, and Greece now functions more like a canary in the mine rather than as a resource to be exploited by France or Germany or the UK. Rather than simply being a victim of imperial control, Greece is an advanced case of the destruction that ensues when markets are allowed to break free from social constraints.

## DISEMBEDED POLITICS AND THE AUTHORITARIAN TURN

As the above clearly points to, the key question before us is political and not a technical-economic one. If the current crisis were simply an economic problem, it would have been solved a long time ago. Even the Greek levels of debt could have been easily solved, for a decade or three at least, through the creation of eurobonds or any number of new finance or tax schemes (or

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<sup>20</sup> Karl Polyani, *The Great Transformation*, Boston 1971.



through default). The problem, however, is political at its core, in terms of both the subjectivities of political actors as well as in terms of the capacity of political power and its institutional mediations to control and regulate transnational capital.

Whether understood through the Polanyian concept of 'double-movement' or the Althusserian concept of 'relative-autonomy', it is the political that is the key moment for securing the extended reproduction of capitalist social relations and the continuation of capital accumulation. Active resistance against the power of the capitalist class and their efforts to expand markets and more fully detach them from their social settings is necessary for the continued reproduction of capitalism as such. In other words, class struggle and the institutions of the state are the necessary means through which capitalism becomes rationalized and made socially viable. However, the Greek situation today presents us with a key problem. Even when presented with active resistance, the state is increasingly incapable of translating these struggles into concessions from capital or into limits on the increasing autonomy of 'the markets'. The increasing disembeddedness of markets has coincided with an increasing disembeddedness of the state from popular struggles and social antagonisms. As the relative autonomy of the state has waned, so has the capacity of social movements to influence the policy making process.<sup>21</sup> Similarly, the legitimacy of the state and political elites seems to be in continual decline in Greece and elsewhere with minimal, if any, substantive repercussions. The speed with which George Papandreou was booted from office in 2011 and replaced with a former official of the European Central Bank is as clear an example as possible as to the disdain and avoidance of popular influences as well as to their inefficacy. Nearly two years of general strikes, occupations, demonstrations, and marches could not accomplish even a budging of government policy let alone the ousting of Papandreou, which EU leaders accomplished in only a few days.

Again, the Greek case presents us with an exceptionally clear example of how this process of the increasing autonomy of the state from popular influence has been made possible and the consequences of this new development. Up until the recent past, Greece was exceptional not in how detached national political institutions were from popular participation but precisely the opposite. The Greek state had typically drawn upon a system of

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<sup>21</sup> We have seen multiple examples of this process at work in recent years, perhaps the most clear being the massive anti-war and anti-cut movements in the UK, the multiple movements of 'indignants' in Spain and elsewhere, and the 'occupy' movements in New York and around the world. In all these cases, the state responds with repression or indifference, not with new policies or concessions.

clientelism and patronage in order to secure the consent of sizable numbers of the dominated classes and to moderate the vicissitudes of the labor market and the national economy. Clientelism was not simply an electoral strategy of political parties; it was also (and most importantly) a mechanism for engendering popular participation and creating political order and legitimacy. The limited scope and comprador nature of capitalism in Greece meant that for most of its history the most significant domestic source of wealth was the state. Traditionally, salaries of high government officials were extremely generous relative to those of other privileged positions within the Greek labor market. This wealth, however, did not simply go to top members of the political directorate; it also flowed to their supporters. Whether in the form of public sector employment, pensions, or state contracts, a sizable amount of the accumulated wealth was also directed toward the party faithful.<sup>22</sup> This not only ensured strong party loyalty but also established direct lines of communication and influence between large segments of the popular classes and the government.

These key linkages between the central institutions of the state and popular forces no longer exist. Clientelism as a system of articulation of popular interests has completely broken down despite the continuation of many of its formal elements. For one, the state no longer has the capacity to placate public opinion and demands through public spending. As noted in the previous section, the increasingly disembedded character of capital has resulted in a weakened capacity for tax collection and increased levels of public debt in Greece and beyond. In the face of this increased weakness, the state turns more and more to overt coercion as a way of securing legitimacy, a phenomenon that Nicos Poulantzas had identified as 'authoritarian statism'.<sup>23</sup>

Fiscal constraints are but one of the dimensions of this new authoritarian turn. In addition to the financial limitations, political power has become ever more centralized with a corollary privileging of executive power over legislative power. In the case of Greece, the European Union has functioned as a great mechanism for centralizing power while minimizing the legislative

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<sup>22</sup> Schooling and higher education is an especially important dimension of how Greek political order was legitimized. University credentials were a requisite for most high level positions within the Greek civil service and the meritocracy of the educational apparatuses have been a key element for the popular acceptance of the political order. For more on the relationship between education, public employment, and political legitimacy see Konstantinos Tsoukalas 'Some Aspects of "Over-Education" in Greece.' *Annals of the New York Academy of Sciences*, No. 268 1976, pp. 419-428.

<sup>23</sup> Nicos Poulantzas, *State, Power, Socialism*, London 1978, pp 203-247.

autonomy of national governments. The Greek crisis demonstrates just how deeply this authoritarian turn can go with EU bureaucrats dictating policy to Athens on almost every issue of any significance. As Wolfgang Schauble reportedly told then Finance Minister Yanis Varoufakis, "Elections cannot be allowed to change the economic policies applied to Greece."

In other countries the situation may be less stark, but the Thatcherite dictum of TINA (there is no alternative) seems to hold for even the most powerful of nation states. The tendency may be uneven but the trajectory is clear. In the United States, the legislative branch has taken a permanent seat of inferiority behind the executive. Technocrats within executive agencies set policy (often within very narrow formal and substantive limits themselves) while legislative bodies are often reduced to oversight or making minor modifications on policies passed down from above. The agency exercised by representative governments only one or two generations ago seems unthinkable today. Slavoj Žižek has been quick to point out the irony that in an age where everything appears possible regarding science and technological innovation, when it come to public policy things seem to be very narrowly fixed:

You want to raise taxes a little bit for the rich, they tell you it's impossible, we lose competitivitiy. You want more money for healthcare: they tell you impossible, this means a totalitarian state.<sup>24</sup>

Perhaps most importantly, this growing centralization and bureaucratization of the capitalist state and the corresponding sclerosis of policies have greatly compromised the old mechanism through which relative autonomy functioned. If the pattern in Greece and beyond had been that class struggles expressed as electoral pressures and social movements were to be absorbed by and mediated through the institutions of the state, today's political institutions are increasingly indifferent to popular sentiments and public opinion. Not only is it the case that an endless series of general strikes and demonstrations have not resulted in any abatement of austerity in Greece, even the electoral victory of Syriza was insufficient to bring about any reforms of significance.

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<sup>24</sup> 2011, Žižek at Occupy Wall Street, <http://occupywallst.org/article/today-liberty-plaza-had-visit-slavoj-zizek/>.

This weakened capacity to address contradictions and demands from below though policy reforms is mirrored by the authoritarian turn and the increased use of repression. If any occupation has flourished during the Greek crisis, it is that of the riot police. Indeed, one of the most key tendencies of contemporary politics is this proliferation of militarized police, heavy-handed security policies, and penalization. From the Patriot Act and the huge rise of rates of incarceration in the United States, the violence that greets student protests in the UK, states of emergency in France and Italy, to countless other examples, the growing impossibility of reform has been accompanied with an increase in overt physical repression.

### REVOLUTION OR SERVITUDE?

The greatest paradox of the current political moment is the fact that the increasing inability for the state to institute reforms does not significantly impact on the ability of societies to continue functioning relatively unabated. That Greeks would be subject to over 25% unemployment, that salaries and pensions would be cut 30%, that the Greek party system would disintegrate to the point that a fascist party would be elected to parliament and Syriza would become the governing party and that, with all of this, there would be no meaningful impact or change in daily life and social order could not have been imagined by Herbert Marcuse on even his most pessimistic day. The whole notion of the functionality of relative autonomy was that through the capacity of the state to mediate class struggles and instate reforms, the extended reproduction of capitalist social relations would be made possible. The political capacity for reform was understood as a necessary precondition for the stability of capitalist societies; as Lenin had noted, a democratic republic is the 'best shell' for capitalism. That the Greek state has so clearly lost this flexibility and capacity for reform without engendering revolutionary upheavals and mass resistance is perhaps the most prescient dimension of the Greek crisis.

One of the key issues that underlies Syriza's failure to secure meaningful concessions from Greece's creditors or, for that matter, its internal bourgeoisie, is the broader inability to the Greek popular classes to disrupt and resist. The series of general strikes noted earlier were all of limited duration, 24 or 48 hours at best. The great numbers of demonstrations that have taken place since the Greek crisis took hold in 2009 and onwards have been largely orderly and of very limited capacity to create disorder and disruption beyond a few predictable hours within central Athens (although

there has been violence present in many of the demonstration, it is usually violence wielded by the state against the demonstrators and not the other way around). What explains the inability of Greeks to rebel against the state and capitalism or even to actively resist unpopular policies by causing significant burdens or damages to the economic and political orders?

According to Frances Fox Piven and Richard Cloward's well know argument, the success of popular movements hinge on their ability to disrupt important processes: "... people cease to conform to accustomed institutional roles, and by doing so, cause institutional disruptions."<sup>25</sup> One key problem today may be as capital becomes more disembedded, the interdependencies that gave workers and other subaltern classes leverage and disruptive capacity have greatly diminished. That is likely but that's not the limit that Greeks have faced for the simple reason that they have not even attempted to wield coercive power through such institutional disruptions. Obviously, 24 hour general strikes are not nearly as disruptive as an open ended strike would be. Obviously, orderly demonstrations are not nearly as disruptive as the burning and looting of hotels and resorts would have been. We could give many more examples of disruptive actions not taken but the question is why it is that even in the face of such a hugely unpopular imposition of austerity there would not be a more sincere and committed attempt to resist and disrupt. After all, the notion that reforms and political flexibility are necessary presupposes that the other alternative would be upheavals and rebellions that would put very existence of capitalism into doubt. If the rebellions and revolts never come, there is little reason for the reforms to be accepted.

Perhaps a good measure of this limit to political subjectivity today is the failure and disarray of the Greek left. For many, the rise of Syriza and its eventual electoral victory served as a clear barometer as to just how successful and consequential the left within Greece had become. Indeed, the fact that a party that largely evolved out of Eurocommunism and allied political movements was able to win elections and form a government within an advanced capitalist society was, on the face of it, a watershed victory. Upon closer inspection, however, things were much more problematic. First and foremost, the dominant topic that drove the Syriza campaign as well as those of the other significant left political parties in Greece (KKE, Antarsya, and, for the September 2015 elections, Popular Unity) was how to minimize

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<sup>25</sup> *Poor People's Movements: Why they Succeed, How they Fail*, New York 1977, p. 24.

and reverse the economic suffering that austerity had brought. As such, all the major factions of the Greek left limited themselves to a very economic and liberal concern with *homo economicus*. The Greek left held the stated goal of ending austerity; increasing employment, increasing economic output, and most centrally, increasing levels of consumption were the goals of all. Missing were any radical notions of how they wanted to transform the society. Beyond the formal party affiliations, what served to divide the competing factions of the left were simply the strategies they thought would work to bring this end of austerity about, a default of the debt or a renegotiation? Within or outside the eurozone?

It could certainly be argued, and it has by many, that just reversing some of the austerity measures in themselves would have been a radical move. While there is much truth to that, the paradox is that a break with EU imposed austerity could only have been achieved through accepting a more acute austerity. By the summer 2015 standoff between the Greek government on the one side and the European Union and European Central Bank on the other, the only possibility of escaping a new memorandum of austerity would have been by defaulting on the debt and dealing with the likely consequences of Greece having its banking system closed and having to shift to a new currency. There was no choice that would have resulted in a reversal of austerity, the choice was between a relatively predictable EU version of austerity and a much more unpredictable version of austerity that accompanied a regained level of national sovereignty. Syriza chose the former, an understandable position and also one that was unavoidable given that the Greek people did not appear to be ready for the later. Having to endure some months, and perhaps longer, of a much more extreme version of austerity (complete with food and fuel rations) would likely have been beyond what most Greeks were willing to endure. The collapse of the Syriza government would have been extremely probable and led to even greater political upheavals. When the stated goal is to reduce economic suffering, to then argue that suffering needs to be increased is completely contradictory and untenable. It is not at all surprising that Popular Unity, a breakaway faction from Syriza that supported leaving the eurozone and ran as a separate party in the September 2015 elections, failed to gain even one parliamentary seat.

There was no broader left political project to organize around, no radical future that would have justified curtailing consumption and the single-minded drive toward ever-greater levels of economic activity. Even more disturbingly, there was not even a desire for the new. Such a project was

beyond utopian, it was not even thinkable within the Greek left. The liberal ethos and standpoint had become so dominant that even the left was trapped with it. Left ideals (radical democracy, reduction of work, equality, autonomy, sexual emancipation, etc.) were no where to be found. What we do find in Greece today, in the best-case scenario, is dedication to combat corruption and eliminate clientelism rather than dedication to remaking the Greek state. In other words, rather than being critical of the state-form as such and thinking of ways that we could try to reconstitute Greece, we are stuck in the liberal fantasy that an objective and impersonal organization of state authority would, finally, provide the conditions for prosperity and justice.

If the constitutive desire of the Greek 'left' is to reduce suffering and extend security, there is no possibility of a revolutionary break with the present. The Greek left as well as Greeks overall will be unwilling and unable to sacrifice utility and security in the name of some higher aim since the highest of aims seems to be utility and security. If the prospects of revolution hinge on being able to articulate and mobilize a desire for something new and better, then things don't look good. The libidinal draw of consumer society seems to have overwhelmed all other possibilities. The Greek people don't want something new, they want Greece circa 2007. The Greek left does not want a radical break, they want economic growth and Keynesian policies. This limited political horizon and the inability of Syriza or any other major left organization in Greece to posit some ethical-political project beyond liberal capitalism have doomed the Greeks to a servile future.

Tragically, as bleak as the outlook is for a revolutionary subject to emerge in Greece it is even worse in rest of the West. Greece is likely still among the most traditional of modern societies and liberal individualism and consumerist culture is much less solidly entrenched than it is in most other western societies. Again, Greece points to a very bleak future for all of us. Incapable of foregoing our role as consumers, desire and self-interest bind us to a life of servility. We can voice demands for more, but any political project that necessitates economic loss is preposterous to all. If incapable of fighting, the best then that the Greeks can do is ask for pity and mercy.

Thus, the Greek crisis is the product of three much more universal tendencies: the increasing disembeddedness of markets from social limits and controls; increasingly bureaucratized, centralized, and authoritarian states that seem incapable of reform; and the dominance of the liberal political subjectivity to the point where the desire for the new, the desire for a radical break with

the present, no longer seems to even exist on the left. It is in this way that the Greek crisis constitutes a concrete universal, it is a singular case that demonstrates a more advanced historical development of processes that all contemporary capitalist societies are being subjected to. The impossibility of reform and the impasse of subjectivity points to a future of servility. Without some revolutionary break to change the future we see before us, we are all doomed to the same crisis as the Greeks, only with worse weather and food in most cases.