

To the Crucible

An Irish engagement with the Greek crisis and the Greek left

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A Greek tragedy

A monumental drama is playing out before our eyes. It is a true Greek tragedy. The plot: A society is being pushed to its limits. The denouement is not yet determined, but survival is at stake and prospects are precarious. Greece is at the sharp end of a radical and risky experiment in how far accumulation by dispossession can go, how much expropriation can be endured, how far the state can be subordinated to the market. It is a global narrative, but the story is a few episodes ahead here.

Greece is the crucible.¹ It is a caldron where concentrated forces are colliding in a process that will bring forth either a reconfiguration of capitalism or the dawn of its demise.

Salaries, pensions, public services are falling, while prices and taxes are rising. Massive asset stripping is underway. Water, power, ports, islands, public buildings are for sale. Unemployment, emigration and evictions have brought a sense of a society unraveling. Homeless people wander the streets and scavenge for food in bins or beg it from the plates of those eating in tavernas. If they are immigrants, they are terrorised. Those looking into a horizon without hope either drift into desolation or perform the ultimate decisive act of suicide. Some have done so in private spaces, while others have chosen public places to underline the political nature of their fate, as they jump from heights, set themselves on fire or shoot themselves. In April 2012, Dimitris Christoulas, a retired pharmacist, who felt he could no longer live a dignified life after his pension had been slashed, shot himself in front of parliament. His last words were: "I am not committing suicide. They are killing me." He urged younger people to fight.

Speaking to Greeks, it is hard to find any without a far reaching systemic critique. They tell you so many details of the deceits of the troika, the corruption of government, the decline in their own standards of living, the pervasive sense of social disintegration. When asked if they see any hope, few answer in the affirmative.

Nevertheless, some do. It is a precarious hope. For some, it is hesitant and weak, full of doubt, but a faint sense of some possible breakthrough from the morass. They protest, they march, they strike, even if they sometimes feel as if they are just going through the motions, because they do it so often now. They are not sure what it will take to break this cycle and

move it on to another level, but they know it cannot go on as it is. For others, hope is clearer and stronger, although not without doubt and not without a sense of nearly overwhelming forces that could swamp all their best efforts. These are the ones who are not only critiquing and resisting, but also strategising and organising for a social transformation that would chart a path out of the crisis, ultimately a new path out of capitalism and to socialism. Conscious of all previous attempts that have crashed and burned or have betrayed the hopes they engendered, they are sober about their chances, but determined in their work.



Athens in October 2012

Ireland and Greece

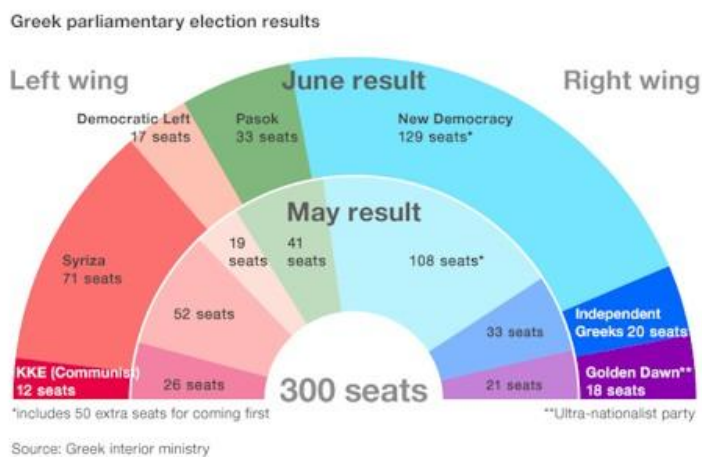
The forces swirling around Greece are swirling around us all. In Ireland we watch Greece very closely. We do so with different degrees of trepidation, terror, hope and inspiration. The crisis brought the troika first to Greece and then to Ireland. Our successive governments, and indeed many of our fellow citizens, have been keen to make the point that we are not Greece. Although all measures enforced on us point in the same direction, the idea is that we'll be compliant and it will go better for us. The narrative of Irish exceptionalism has prevailed. It was put to me on a radio programme: "We don't want to be like Greece, do we?" I couldn't agree. Naturally I don't want wages and pensions and social services to plunge so low and for poverty and suicide to blight even more lives, but I do want us to resist in such massive numbers. Moreover, I do want us to have an alternative on offer such as what I see shaping up in Greece.

In international tv coverage of demonstrations in Greece, we saw a banner declaring "We are not Ireland" and we heard of protesters chanting "We are not Ireland. We will resist." It stung. Those of us who are resisting felt acutely our failure to mobilise sufficient numbers to put up the resistance the situation required. Nevertheless, the Irish left has looked with respect and solidarity at the Greek resistance and continued in our efforts to up our game here. The United Left Alliance (ULA) organised a meeting where Syriza MP Despina Charalampidou spoke. Few remarked upon it, but I was aware of how impossible it would have been in previous decades to have trotskyists sharing a platform so harmoniously with a left eurocommunist. On the day before the June election in Greece, we held a demonstration of solidarity with Greece on O'Connell Street, which was initiated by people associated with the occupy movement and inclined to be skeptical of electoral politics. Although it was to support the Greek resistance and not Syriza specifically, there was strong support for Syriza in evidence. I spoke at it myself in this vein.

The whole world was watching

International focus on Greece had soared when Syriza came second in the May 2012 election, leaping from 4.6% to 17%, with polls indicating that it could come first in another election to be held in June. Massive media attention ensured that all eyes were on Greece during this interval. The global elite warned of the dangers. Indeed it could be construed as international intimidation. RTE, our own public service broadcaster, adopted the tone of the masters of the universe as they reported the situation in Greece. Although most international commentators were warning the Greek people not to vote for Syriza, an article in *Forbes* magazine advocated "Give Greece what it deserves: Communism ... What the world needs, lest we forget, is a contemporary example of Communism in action."²

As it turned out, although Syriza leapt to 27%, it came second again to New Democracy, which formed a coalition government with Pasok and Dimar, two supposedly left parties. The international media, which was giving Greece saturation coverage between the two elections, then turned their attention elsewhere. The left has kept its eyes on Greece, however, and watched, as Syriza rose in the polls, consistently coming out the highest party and raising the prospect that Syriza will win the next election.



Despite this, much of the recent international media attention has seen Syriza reduced to a footnote with the focus on Golden Dawn. GD are rising and are now the third party in most polls. This does deserve attention and analysis. This xenophobic party demands deportation of immigrants, attack them on the streets, overturn their market stalls, threaten dire consequences if they remain in Greece. Their theatrics create media spectacle: nazi salutes in parliament, distribution of food and collection of blood for Greeks only, denouncing a theatrical production as blasphemous and driving it out of town, etc. Many of their antics and claims are comical, particularly the conceptualisation of themselves as in a direct line in the story stemming from the glories of ancient Greece. What is most worrying is the vigilante role they are playing with support from the police. Using demagogic techniques, they have won significant support in destitute city neighborhoods with large immigrant populations by stirring up desperate Greeks against them. This toxic syndrome has even penetrated schools with students threatening each other or their teachers with a call to GD.

Syriza as synthesis

There is a more sober and serious storyline at play in the transition of Syriza from a coalition of 4.5% to a party of 27% and the main opposition to a potential government in a scenario of epochal crisis. This is the story that I have been following in the last months. I saw the international left being galvanised by the success of Syriza in a way that raised our sights and held hope of becoming a force up to the demands of our times.

What is it about Syriza that has so stirred the international left? Is it because a left party suddenly surged from being one of many parties standing up to those who rule the world to one that could come to power in a way that could chart a new

path for the left? Is it because we want, not just to struggle, but to win somewhere? Yes, this is surely part of it, but I think that it is more than that.

For me, Syriza is synthesis. It is a convergence of the old and new left. Within that, it is a convergence of diverse old left traditions, which were once so divergent, as well as various new left forces. Gathered up into Syriza are ex-CP communists, trotskysts, maoists and left social democrats as well as independent leftists, feminists, ecologists, alter globalisation activists and indignados.

This is particularly meaningful to me, because I have been part of both the old and new left. I have participated in and sometimes polemicised against all of these forces. I was an activist in the 1960s new left as well as the recent occupy movement. I have been a member of social democratic and communist parties. I have reflected over the years on the best and worst of all these strands. I have had a particularly intense relation to the communist movement, which set the last century on fire, attracted the commitment of brave and brilliant comrades and ultimately, often tragically, disappointed so many of the hopes it engendered. My engagement with it, both as an author and activist, is much of what has drawn me over the years to Synaspismos and now to Syriza. It represents a critical continuity with that history along with a radical openness to a different future.

I believe in a politics that makes the long march through all the institutions of society. This includes electoral politics, but not in a myopic fixation on parliaments. It struggles for power and creates alternative structures in the streets, workplaces, schools, universities, media, arts. I see Syriza as oriented to this kind of politics, seeing their presence in parliament as part of a wider social movement. It is even bringing in those in new movements who are skeptical about state power, seeing it as so limited, so subordinate to capital, so controlled by oligarchy, and persuading them that states still have some power and that the state must be a site of struggle. They envision governing in such a way as to combine horizontal and vertical power, both representative and direct democracy. They are attuned to the demands of the historical moment, requiring the left to surpass itself.



Syriza poster, Synaspismos office in Athens, Helena Sheehan on the streets with Syriza in Athens

A mini-odyssey

This brought me back to Greece in August-September and again in October. I have been there many times over the past decades, swimming in the sea, drinking in tavernas, discussing politics, reading novels and histories shedding light on Greek society and especially the Greek left. Now I wanted to test my sense of Syriza and its importance for the international left, to extend my interaction with it, to explore the dynamics of the older and newer forces within it, to discover what discussions and debates were underway and to probe how they were preparing for power. I knew that power was much more than winning elections and forming a government. I wanted to know more of what sort of social transformation they envisaged.

There were a number of visits after the election from leftists from abroad asking: What next? Several of these were in July during an interval of post-strike, post-election exhaustion and sweltering heat, which brought the level of activity down a few notches. Laurie Penny wrote in a book called *Discordia*, based on a week in Athens, that she had come expecting to see riots and instead saw what happens when riots die away and horrified inertia sets in.³ Hilary Wainwright in *Red Pepper* reported on the quieter political activity going on under the surface, describing Syriza as “Like a swan moving forward with relaxed confidence while paddling furiously beneath the surface”.⁴ I wanted to follow up on this a few months down the line, especially in the autumn when the tempo was rising again.

Sojourning in Zakynthos

I started in Zakynthos, combining a holiday in late August – early September with seeking and finding Syriza there. I contacted the secretary of Synaspismos there, with a referral from Synaspismos in Athens. Along with Sam Nolan, secretary of the Dublin Council of Trade Unions and long time left activist, I met Nikos Potamitis, an orthopedic surgeon and an astute and articulate activist. For hours we talked politics in a café in Bohali as the sun set over a panoramic view of Zakynthos town. We started with his own political trajectory from KKE (Communist Party of Greece) through the different forms of Synaspismos and Syriza and covered a wide range of topics, from the end of the USSR to the next phase of Syriza. We next met when we visited the Syriza office in Zakynthos town and he showed us their election literature and posters and described the range of their activities on the island. Syriza won the June election on the island and sent a left MP to the national parliament for the first time in many years. Support for Syriza leapt from 4% to 35% and activist numbers swelled from 50 to 500 between May and September. We then experienced the generous hospitality of his home in Akrotiri over a dinner of many courses with his wife Effie, a drama teacher, and his children, as well as Syriza candidate, Athena Mylona. Again we talked politics for many hours. We left laden with gifts of cake, chocolate, wine, brandy, a cd of local music, a Syriza poster and flag. The following week, we were invited to come to the office again when we met the central committee of Syriza in Zakynthos, who welcomed us warmly. I enquired about their occupations. There were two doctors, an actor-director, a financial consultant, a tourist shop owner, a teacher, an architectural detailer, plus several who worked in the agricultural sector. They commented that Sam and I embodied the ideal combination for the left: a carpenter and a professor. We walked along the harbour in the evening, feeling more hopeful than we feel at home. The daily swim in the sea at dawn made for a great sense of well being too.



In Zakynthos: Sam Nolan and Nikos Potamitis in Bohali, Helena Sheehan at Syriza office, Yiorgos Sigouros and Nikos Potamitis at Syriza meeting

Our discussions, particularly with Nikos, raised themes that would recur in most of my conversations with Syriza activists: the concrete manifestations of the crisis in Greek society, the need for a radical alternative to be on offer, the transformation of Syriza to a bigger, more diverse, yet more unified, party, the debate about whether or not to exit the eurozone. Nikos is on the left of Synaspismos and wary of Syriza becoming the new Pasok. He is strongly in favour of

nationalising the banks and exiting the eurozone, so as to take control of the economy. He gave many details of the manifestations of crisis in society: impoverishment, emigration, suicide. He described the collapse of the middle strata and proletarianisation of professionals. Well aware of what doctors abroad earn, he is determined to stay, although the economics of a basic salary of €1500 a month and falling are not so easy. He is also conscious of the struggle of those who work for €500 a month and those who have no work and no pay at all. He is acutely concerned about the deterioration of the health service, which cannot meet people's needs.

Some of those on low wages in Greece are so highly qualified. The woman who was cleaning our room was a math teacher in Albania, who was delighted to discuss the novels of Ismail Kadare with me. She has lived in Greece for 15 years and doesn't want to go back to an Albania run by mafia. Many Albanians have returned. A waiter serving us was from Bulgaria and aspiring to be a professor of philology. He liked the idea that I was a philosopher until it came out that I am a marxist. He said that socialism wiped out traditions that took thousands of years to build. He is an orthodox christian and a constitutional monarchist. The fluency in multiple languages among those working in the service sector is striking.

Staying in touch with Nikos since we left, we were delighted to receive a link to a video of a creative protest where they burnt in the public square a representation of Cerberus, a mythical creature, a three headed dog guarding the entrance to the lower world from which it is impossible to return. This dog was made in the theatrical laboratory in the Potamitis home. The three heads of the dog were named as the troika and the hind flanks were Pasok and New Democracy.⁵

The crisis is not so evident on the islands as in the cities. Tourists come for their holidays and most go away having seen little sign of it. Indeed, tourism has brought income and employment to these islands and spared them many of the indignities of the cities, where people beg and scavenge in the streets. However, when you ask people about their lives, the working people who staff the hotels, shops, hospitals and schools, they will tell you how their incomes have dropped, how their conditions of work have deteriorated, how many are leaving, how their society is unraveling. If they are immigrants, they will tell you that their children fear Golden Dawn coming for them in their schools and kindergartens. Even though the neonazi presence is not so strong on this island, they see them on television and a sense of menace has skewed their forward gaze.

Arriving in Athens

When I arrived home from Zakynthos in September, I began planning my trip to Athens in October. I started building my network of contacts, starting with my existing professional counterparts, ie, professors of philosophy, and my political counterparts, ie, ex-communist-party-communists, ie, Synaspismos / Syriza. From there, I branched out, especially after I arrived in Athens. I spoke to university professors, members of parliament, party workers, trade union officials, journalists, teachers, doctors, lawyers, hotel staff, taxi drivers, shop assistants, waiters, unemployed. I heard the stories of people from all stages of the life cycle, articulating political views ranging from communist to neonazi, ie, KKE to GD. I walked miles of the streets of Athens every day, mostly alone, but sometimes with academics, activists and journalists. I looked and listened with the heightened awareness of the curious visitor, many notches up from that during my daily rounds of Dublin.

I arrived on 9 October, an hour after Angela Merkel also arrived. My flight had already been booked when her visit was announced. The timing was unfortunate in that it meant a lot of logistical stress about whether and how I would get there with all the police restrictions and work stoppages and, even worse, arriving too late to join in the protests. Despite the cancellation of public transport options and road blocks, I managed to get a taxi. The taxi driver drove while talking on his mobile and spreading a huge map over the steering wheel and writing on it, which was really nerve wracking. When I arrived at my hotel, it was so shuttered down that it was hard to find a way into it. My twitter feed showed that the tens of thousands were gone from Syntagma Square and only small numbers scuffling with riot police remained.

I strolled around the area surrounding Omonia Square and struck up conversations about the events of the day. No one welcomed Angela Merkel. Many referred back to the German occupation of Athens during the war and claimed that they still owed war reparations. In the hotel, visitors wanted to know where not to go to avoid danger. The receptionist on duty told me that he had been in Syntagma Square for the mass protests. Eventually the shutters came up and the road blocks came down. On the television I saw Merkel leaving. On a loop was footage of the visit, the weirdest part being Samaras and Merkel walking down a leafy deserted street talking sedately. It was so surreal, considering the real atmosphere on the streets. Only riot police could create that bubble for her. I watched hours of news and current affairs on Greek tv in the evening, as I was to do every other evening, getting the gist, but missing the nuance, but finding it riveting notwithstanding.

My first port of call the next day was the office of Synaspismos / Syriza in Eleftherias Square. It is a multi-story building where 70 people work. Another 100 or so work for Syriza in the parliament now as well. I was greeted warmly by Dimitra Tsami, with whom I had been in e-mail contact for some months. I met a number of other comrades and settled into a meeting with Costas Isychos, secretary for international affairs. He knew more about Ireland than most people I met in Greece and asked me for my assessment of various forces, especially ULA and Sinn Fein. Mostly we spoke of Greece and Syriza. Again the main themes were those characterising all my conversations with Syriza activists: the manifestations of crisis, the transformations of Syriza, the preparations for power. Costas covered much ground. There is extreme alienation from the political system. The class structure is changing. The middle strata is becoming proletarianised. There is a new strata of the wealthy bourgeoisie. In addition to the old oligarchs, typified by the shipowners, there is a newer layer of casino capitalists, who have GD as their reserve force. As the crisis deepens, people are moving from the centre to the right and left. The influx into Syriza, while a source of optimism, is a source of danger too, as some of the newer elements have been infected with neoliberalism and clientalism. Although the political system is corrupt, it is necessary to engage with it in order to transform it.

It is necessary to show that the left can govern. If Syriza is to take state power, it will do so in an extremely unfavourable geopolitical situation. As he spoke, I got some sense of the sober strategic thinking going on about how to deal with various scenarios that might come into play. For example: about how to survive if cut off from international funding and existing trade relations. They have a team of economists working on all possible problems, such as exiting the eurozone, alternative sources of energy, etc. He stressed the need to build international solidarity. Syriza is the last hope for Greece, as they see it. After that, it's Golden Dawn. This makes people very serious, realising what a heavy weight of responsibility they bear. Among the disparate elements that have combined to become Syriza, there is a good climate for dealing with differences and converging to put their efforts into the tasks before them.

Professors, parliamentarians and policy process

This theme of how serious the situation is and what a weight of responsibility they bear was echoed over and over in my talks with Syriza, especially by those in leading positions. In my e-mails and conversations with Aristides Baltas, there was a really strong sense of this. He is a professor of philosophy and a very influential thinker in Syriza. We met in Syntagma Square and walked to the University of Athens. It is a very urban university. The main building is a striking classical edifice standing between the National Library and Academy of Athens on the wide boulevard of Panepistemiou Street. The rest of its buildings are scattered through city streets in between shops, cafes and offices. We settled into one of these cafes. So many of my meetings were right out on the city streets with all the noise of the traffic and bustle of city life. Those months of Occupy University sessions out there on Dame Street made me accustomed to this, so I not only managed it, but found it bracing and appropriate. I thought of our discussions as in continuity with those of the agora of ancient Athens.

Aristides Baltas has been co-ordinating an elaborately participative programmatic process. In the past few years there has been a collective effort to pull together the best ideas for exiting the crisis and transforming the society into a coherent programme. This was published in a book of several hundred pages, which was mostly ignored by the Greek media, who nevertheless kept saying that they had no programme. Since the election, a more intensified and encompassing process has been underway. They are thinking very concretely about what to do the day after being elected, about what legislation to pass to revoke the memorandum and the austerity measures, about how to restore wages, pensions, public services, about how to clear out corruption and clientalism. Moreover, they are strategising about how to transform the structures of the state itself and how to formulate policy within this transformation. They reject an approach that concentrates on shadow cabinet and special advisors. When elected, they will call those who work in various ministries together to ask them how they could best do their jobs and to discuss how the ministry should be run. Indeed, they are already doing this now. They are assembling people who work and have expertise in various areas to come together to form committees and formulate policies now. There are groups working in economics, energy, culture, education, local government, foreign policy and other areas.

Indeed I attended one of these meetings that was set up to co-ordinate foreign policy and defense. Nearly a hundred people gathered in Art Garage in Exarchia. They included professors of international relations, members of parliament, diplomats, public servants in the ministries of foreign affairs and defense, members of the armed forces and others who felt they had a contribution to make to policy in these areas. They also included people from all the constituent elements of Syriza. At the beginning of the meeting I was introduced by Sotiris Roussos, a professor of international relations, who had been given a surprisingly elaborate internet-researched bio of me, doubtlessly prepared by Dimitra. He then translated for me as I spoke of how I see Syriza and its importance for the international left. I then listened to the five hour deliberation that followed, which was serious and harmonious. It was not that everyone agreed about everything, but that there was a constructive atmosphere in discussing disagreements.

Although the room was bursting with expertise, the point was made that policy was not just about expertise, but about politics, about what class interests were being served. The foreign policy of all previous Greek governments had served certain class interests and they would have to go down a different road and serve different class interests. There were proposals to widen policy participation even further through the creation of interactive internet portals, not only in Greek, but in other languages. Parliamentarians warned against domination of the party by the parliamentary group. Rena Dourou especially spoke about this. She argued that the centre of gravity should not be the parliamentary group, because there was need to maintain multilevel relations with wide social forces. She is most famous abroad for being the one who was soaked with a glass of water during an encounter with Ilias Kasidiaris of Golden Dawn on tv. In Greece, she is seen a possible future foreign minister.

There were many speakers who focused on particular countries or regions. It was striking how little emphasis was put on the EU, especially the north of it, as opposed to Greece's neighbours in the Balkans, Middle East and North Africa. One of the comrades who did a stint translating for me was Yiannis Bournous, who represents Syriza at the Party of the European Left. One of the few Greeks I met with much knowledge of Ireland and the Irish left, he made the point that Ireland has no party affiliated to the PEL, which is not good, we agreed.

My discussions with Aristides before and after this Syriza meeting put the process I was witnessing in broader context. There are open Syriza meetings everywhere, especially in workplaces, universities and neighbourhoods (often outdoors), where people are putting forward their ideas for the future. Not only that, but there are solidarity networks struggling to meet people's needs in the present by providing food and medical care to those in need. There are alternative economies in exchange of goods and services at grassroots level. Syriza participates in these. These networks can't solve all these problems, but they can socialise them. These activities have a strong prefigurative thrust to them, enabling a more

collectivist experience and an alternative to individual isolation, as impoverishment intensifies, on the way to a more collectivist future society. It reminds me of our 1960s liberated zones.

The old reform-revolution debate is irrelevant now, Aristides claimed. The space for a social democratic solution is closed now. It is capitalism v the people. While it is not possible to do everything they want as soon as they want, the socialist perspective remains firm, he underlined. It is only Syriza, Aristides insisted, who are doing the transitional thinking. Both KKE and Antarsya speak as if it would be possible to move immediately and totally from capitalism to socialism. Indeed, I have read the KKE statements and the attitude seems to be that it is the October Revolution or nothing. It is necessary to learn everything that can be learned from the left of the past and to redefine socialism for the 21st century, we agreed.

Preparations were underway for a conference to be held at the end of November leading to a bigger congress in the spring to reorganise Syriza into a unified party. It was going well, Aristides said. When they were smaller, it was more difficult getting the coalition to cohere and stabilise, but now that they are so much bigger and have so much more responsibility to provide an alternative for Greek society, it concentrates minds and there is a good atmosphere now. The purpose of the conference was to define further their political / ideological identity, to concretise further their programme for government and to decide on new organisational structures. They are still trying to find the right balance between their existing traditions and formations and new political forms. The structures of Syriza are radically open, very much in contrast with those of KKE. It is possible to participate without being a member. Indeed it is only under new structures that some of those who have been participating until now, without being a member of any of the component organisations of Syriza, will actually become members of Syriza.

Aristides was responsible for drafting the declaration for this conference. At the end of our second meeting, he walked with me to the university office of Michalis Spourdalakis, professor of political science, who was also working on this. They discussed various amendments to it, doing so in English, to include me in their deliberations. We spoke of the traditions of political education in left parties, something which was stronger in the past than now, which we all agreed need to be revived. There are no permanent structures for this in Syriza and they thought that there need to be now. There is a great thirst for knowledge in evidence and they told me of lectures at the universities on the history of the left, marxist theory and the fate of the USSR that had attracted large attendances. Many of the younger generation involved in left politics, I have found, are highly educated in a formal sense, but not in the traditions and ideas of the left. This was underlined for me a few days later when I asked an educated young woman active in Syriza what she thought about marxism. She said that she was well disposed towards it, but didn't really know much about it.



At University of Athens: Professor Michalis Spourdalakis and Professor Aristides Baltas

Both Aristides and Michalis stressed that Syriza is an experiment. It is following the shape of history and the rhythms of the social movements. Both at different stages quoted to me a poem of Antonio Machado "We make the road by walking." Both of them have a long history of political activity and have been in Synaspismos from its earliest days. Both are marxists, but committed to an undogmatic form of marxism. Syriza as such is not marxist, but marxism is a strong force within it, with no one position within marxism having the status of orthodoxy. There is support for a whole spectrum, from A to Z, Althusser to Zizek. Or going further back, from Bukharin to Trotsky to Mao.

Aristides then left and I had a long talk with Michalis. He continued on the theme of transformation of Syriza, the convergence of the traditions of the left with those of the newer social movements. He was involved in the Greek Social Forum as well as the European Social Forum and World Social Forum. He emphasised, as did others on this question, that Synaspismos and Syriza participated in wider social movements without trying to control them. At the time of the more recent movement of the squares, Syriza people played their part in it while respecting its autonomy. While the KKE condemned it as anti-communist and anti-labour, Syriza argued from within in the face of these tendencies, which beset the occupy movement almost everywhere. He described the many activities in which Syriza is involved now and discussed their prefigurative dimension. Their local bases are more community centres than party offices.

Syriza is forging a way of strategising about socialism that critically evaluates all previous attempts at socialism, while overcoming the long disputations and divisions of the left on this question. He believes that capitalism is testing its limits in Greece, which puts an extraordinary challenge to the Greek left. This is why it is time for the left to recompose, to transcend both the bankrupt reformism of social democracy and the deluded vanguardism of those still dreaming of storming the winter palace. Syriza wants neither to settle for whatever might be on offer by capital nor to reject whatever reform might lift people's lives now in a paralysis that puts everything off until the ultimate revolution. Syriza wants neither to settle for governmentalism nor to succumb to governmentophobia.

Another professor at University of Athens with whom I had discussions was Kostas Gavroglu, whom I knew from a symposium at University of Paris on marxist historiography of science, where we both spoke. We met at the university's historical archive, of which he is director, and went to a café across the street for lunch. He spoke of Syriza as coming from a long development from KKE interior, opting for 'socialism with a human face' over Moscow domination, basically from the eurocommunist tradition. He was on the central committee of that and has been part of the various transformations of the Greek left for those decades. He is hopeful about Syriza's prospects and put a lot of emphasis on its participation in wider social movements, unlike the KKE who undermined them. This was a constant theme in my conversations.

Generations

It was great talking to my contemporaries about those decades and how we had experienced the same movements, but particularly the communist movement, from different places. There was not only an ideological harmony, but a generational sensibility, in our interactions. I needed to speak to the younger generation too, I knew, and Aristides and Kostas encouraged me to do so and put me in touch with younger activists. I found the intergenerational dynamic to be healthy on the whole. My contemporaries, the 60-somethings, referred to it the most, making the point that that they should be on the second line these days, with younger faces out front. They are proud to have someone of the caliber of Alexis Tsipras, who is 38, to be the forward face of their party. They are also proud to have Manolis Glezos, who is 90, out there beside him as well. Glezos is a Syriza MP, who took down the swastika from the acropolis during the nazi occupation, served time in prison and parliament over the years, as well as working as a writer and editor, still a strong voice, still facing the riot police in the streets.

Seeking younger perspectives, I met Demosthenes Papadatos in Syntagma Square and we proceeded to yet another café in the university area. He is editor of *Red Notebook*, an online journal⁶, which is colorful, energetic and intelligent. I follow

it with the help of computerised translations. It deals with the latest political news, reviews films, books and lectures, notifies of events and engages in critical analysis of everything from the memorandum to the relation of the left to the enlightenment. Demosthenes is keen on the left using its voice in social media and on the internet generally. He is not only active in doing this, but also works in the parliament on immigration as well as on his PhD. From a Pasok background, he became involved in anti-imperialist and alter-globalisation movements while still in high school. He participated in the World Social Forum. When in university, he first joined the Greek SWP, but moved to Synaspismos and then Syriza, because he believed in unity of the left. Syriza has gained much ground among youth through their participation on social movements, working within them, rather than coming into them with an agenda formulated elsewhere. When the movement of the squares began, he recounted, left activists were *personae non grata*. There were even banners saying "Left, go away". However, as a result of the constructive participation of Syriza people, the climate changed. By the end of June 2011, there was a rapprochement between the *indignados*, the left and the unions, culminating in a two day general strike. *Red Notebook* published in Greek a lot of material from the occupy movement. As others in Syriza, he put a huge stress on international solidarity. He sees *Red Notebook* as playing a role in bringing the conversation taking place elsewhere, especially on the crisis, into Greece. Greece will need all the support it can get in the coming period. As others, he was thinking seriously about the next phases of Syriza as a party and as a government. The two hours went quickly and I had to rush away to another appointment on this day when I scheduled my time too tightly, but there were many threads left for another day.

Another 30-something I met was Ioanna Meitani, who is on the editorial board of *Enthemata*, a supplement on theory and opinion, of the daily left paper *Avgi*. She had a distinctive generational perspective that was a challenge for me to consider. She sees the 60s generation of the left, my generation, as being young when everything seemed open, whereas her generation came on the scene when everything seemed closed. It was the loss of dreams that led them to revolt. She felt that my generation had dreams, but a habit of defeat, although some of them, she admitted, were still working incredibly hard at this stage to realise such dreams in the new scenario. When I asked about socialism, she said that it was a dream, but she wasn't sure if it was possible. Even in revolt, they have scaled down dreams, it seemed to me. On marxism, she knew that there were lots of marxists in Syriza, but hasn't engaged with it enough to have formed a position on it. She has been very active in the open structures of Syriza, but is not actually a member of it, because she is not a member of any of its constituent organisations. When the new party is formed with direct individual membership, she will be a member. She is in favour of this new direction. There will still be platforms, but these constituent groups will fuse. I asked about gains and losses in this scenario. She sees only gains and no losses. I have to admit that, although I know that it is the right way to go, I worry about losses, about postmodernist or social democratic sensibilities swamping marxist analyses.

Ioanna works now for the Rosa Luxemburg Foundation, an educational and research network set up by Die Linke with funding from the Bundestag, which has set up an office in Athens. This was where we met. It is a bright attractive space, dominated by red and white walls with big black and white photos from the history of the left in Germany and Greece. Syriza also has such a foundation called the Nikos Poulantzas Institute. Both are part of an international network called Transform 'a European network for alternative thinking and political dialogue'.⁷



Syriza youth in Syntagma Square, Demosthenes Papadatos at Syntagma Square, Ioanna Meitani at Rosa Luxemburg Foundation

Haris Golemis is director of Nikos Poulantzas Institute. This institute was initiated by Synaspismos in 1997 and 'aims at fostering the values of the left, systematically developing an awareness of contemporary social, ecological, political and cultural issues and exploring the emerging changes within society' with a 'commitment to the ideals of socialism with democracy'.⁸ We agreed to meet as a march was assembling in the grounds of the National Archeological Museum. We co-ordinated our positions by mobile phone. There were so many people gathering, I wondered how I would recognise him. "He looks like Einstein", a comrade told me, and sure enough he did. He explained that the NPI came from the renovative communist tradition, but its political space now could be defined as broad left. Although it came from Synaspismos and now Syriza, it is autonomous. It will be expanding further in the future. One of its projects is to study the new political forces in the European left. In describing the composition and activities of Transform, he noted that one of the few countries without a body affiliated to it is Ireland. We would have to think about what we might do about that, I said.

The communists (the KKE ones)

I thought that I should also speak to those of other political perspectives on the left, both about how they see the crisis in Greek society and how they see Syriza. I was especially interested in finding out what was going on in the KKE. I had been reading their statements during and since the elections, where they prioritised attacking Syriza over the troika and the right. "Don't trust Syriza." was their message. Obviously many of their own voters thought otherwise, as their voters deserted them and voted for Syriza in significant numbers. They won 26 seats in May, but only 12 in June. Their leader, Aleka Papariga, is a small combative woman, who lashes out at Syriza, even when it is not a relevant answer to the question asked. In Ireland, two parties, the Communist Party of Ireland and the Workers Party, both support the KKE and echo their attacks on Syriza. The KKE is a formidable party with deep roots in Greek history and considerable support in the Greek working class. Many members of Syriza were once members of the KKE and feel part of a common history. When Syriza reached out to them in the name of unity of the left, a unity that might have made a crucial difference in being able to form a left government in June, they were spurned and attacked. Syriza have expressed regret, rather than attacking back, although at a Syriza event, the Slovenian philosopher Slavoj Žižek referred to the KKE as "the party of the people who are still alive because they forgot to die", which was offensive.

Although they have driven away people who want to relate to the communist tradition in a critical manner, I thought that there still must be people left in it who were reflective and disturbed by the current line. I wanted to meet someone who would speak to me honestly about this. I found someone who was willing to do so, through a trusted intermediary, but it is indicative of the atmosphere in the party that he did not want me to use his name in my writing. We spoke openly for three hours in an outdoor café. He is a young, serious and highly educated person, who is strongly committed to the

party, proud of its past, but worried about its future, because of its present line. He defended the party programme, which is committed to appropriate alliances, and he believes that the party's current practice is at odds with its programme. The KKE, as he sees it, is the historical party of marxism in Greece. It has been at the forefront of all progressive struggles in Greek society. It resisted occupation, fought a civil war, endured torture and exile, led anti-imperialist opposition to wars in Yugoslavia and Iraq.

The attacks on what is now Syriza go back to splits from the party, which were bitter and passionate. He sees those who split as abandoning that history, although I argued that it is still their history too. They see themselves as carrying it forward in the most appropriate way for these times. He does not see it that way. He thinks that they have moved to the right. The KKE are organising for socialism, he argued, whereas Syriza want to manage capitalism. He also took issue with their position on both the EU and the euro. I pointed out that many in Syriza agree with him about the eurozone. He replied that Syriza is fluid. It is many things. He respects people in it. He is open to an alliance with it, but with many reservations and conditions. Is there much discussion of this in the party? I asked. No, the subject is taboo, he admitted. There is a more general debate about alliances and coalitions, but no open discussion of the attacks on Syriza. The party is not only losing voters, but members, he revealed regretfully. There are stricter criteria for membership now. Members are being expelled. This strategy, this atmosphere, will drive the party to extinction, he concluded, as we ended on this sad note.



The KKE on the streets

The other left coalition: Antarsya

Another force on the left standing apart from Syriza and making some of the same criticisms is Antarsya, a coalition of the anti-capitalist left. I had thought of it as primarily trotskyist, but Kostas Skordoulis explained to me that it more or less mirrors the composition of Syriza in encompassing trotskyists, maoists, eurocommunists, etc. Kostas is a professor of epistemology of science at the University of Athens. We had only met face-to-face on this day, despite several years of e-mail contact regarding work of mine in *Kritiki*, a journal he edits, and an Engels symposium he is organising for the upcoming international history of science congress. We went walking around Exarchia together, as he showed me the spot, now a shrine, where Alexandros Grigoropoulos, a 15 year old student was killed by police, setting off widespread rioting, especially of youth, in December 2008. We moved on to the famous polytechnic, the scene of resistance, marking the beginning of the end of the junta. We moved on to Exarchia Square and eventually settled down in a café across from his party's hq. He mapped the current state of trotskyism globally. I have always found the proliferation of trotskyist parties and their different 4th internationals or committees to reconstruct the 4th international a bit bewildering. The atmosphere on the left has shifted and those of us from the different streams of the left are interacting more constructively with each other now. With Kostas, it is particularly easy and we have no problem in establishing a warm, respectful and honest rapport.

Antarsya, he told me, has 4000 members, organised in all cities and many islands. They have councilors elected in every prefecture. In the May elections, they got 1.2%, whereas in June they only got 0.33%, as voters moved toward Syriza. There are voices in Antarsya advocating joining Syriza, he admitted, although he is not one of them. Indeed, the international body to which his group is affiliated, the USFI, supports Syriza, against the will of their Greek members. Kostas believes that it is necessary to have a left alternative to Syriza, a mass revolutionary party that can overthrow the system, because Syriza is too adaptationist, too willing to work the system, too anxious to win the electoral base alienated from Pasok. All the same, unlike the KKE, they do not adopt a sectarian stance towards Syriza. They work together in communities, unions, universities. Indeed, earlier in the day, he was walking past the café where I was with Aristides Baltas and a pleasantly collegial conversation ensued. We met again the following week on the day of a march when Kostas was marching with Antarsya and I was marching with Syriza, but nevertheless we were colleagues and comrades.



At Athens Polytechnic: Professor Kostas Skordoulis and Professor Helena Sheehan, elsewhere in Exarchia: Christos Kefalis

The unaffiliated left

Another person with whom I had been in ongoing contact for a number of years was Christos Kefalis, who has translated a number of my publications into Greek. He is editor of the journal *Marxist Thought* and a book called *October and Our Age*, in both of which my work has appeared. He is committed to work that unites all serious marxists across the various traditions. He is a freelance writer, editor and translator, as well as a committed left activist. He was in the KKE 25 years ago, but is now independent left. He voted for Antarsya in May and Syriza in June. He has a very thorough knowledge of the history of the Greek left. I asked him many questions, which he ably answered, as we walked through Exarchia, settled into a café and then on to a taverna, where the food and wine added to the pleasure of conversation, but got in the way of taking notes. Looking to the present, he thinks that this is the final government that the ruling class can form. He expressed regret that Antarsya and KKE will not unite with Syriza. The KKE has hardened with time, he observed, and they are expelling members. "They are collecting everything obsolete", he said sadly. They are defending stalinism and even the Moscow trials of the 1930s that sent honest communists to their deaths.

More recently I have formed contacts in Greece through social media and I managed to meet face-to-face at least one of the people who tweet from Greece, who keep me so well informed about what is happening when I am not there. My tweets from Greece brought a message from Damian Mac Con Uladh about meeting, which I was delighted to receive. We met in Syntagma Square and proceeded to a Monastiraki restaurant for lunch. On the way I had my first look at the metro, which is impressive, especially with the display of archeological artifacts unearthed in the building of it. One of the best things to come out of the all the money spent on the Olympics, he commented, unlike the many rotting stadiums. Damian was working as a journalist at *Athens News*, although he hadn't been paid in months. He also writes a blog called *A Gael in Greece* and articles on Greece for the *Irish Times*. How did he come be in Greece? I wondered. He had been

working on his PhD in history and met his Greek wife in a German archive. Although I was keen to draw him out about living and working in Greece, and did so, we spent a fair bit of time talking about Ireland and the GDR as well. His knowledge of all three countries is impressive, as are his insights into the many ironies of life, especially life on the left, in them.

Another person with a connection to Ireland I met in Athens was Eugenia Siapera, a lecturer in Thessaloniki, who would soon be taking up a job in Dublin at DCU as a lecturer in social media. She was sorry to be leaving, but she sees no future for her children in Greece. She spoke not only of the many general symptoms of crisis, but of the decline in the schools. She comes from a communist background and joined the communist youth organisation when she was younger, under the influence of her father, who was arrested and exiled for his activism. She is left, but does not belong to any party. She voted for the Pirate party in May, but switched to Syriza in June. She is incensed by the rise of Golden Dawn. A few years ago people laughed at them, she said, but now the situation is worrying. Lots of threads to be taken up again when she comes to Dublin, I thought.



Migrants: Dr Damian Mac Con Uladh in Athens and Dr Eugenia Siapera and sons in Dublin

The once left: Dimar and Pasok

Dimar, Democratic Left, is a breakaway from Syriza in 2010, in the direction of Pasok. Some of their MPs are ex-Pasok. They won 6.3% in the last elections and are now the third party in the present government, implementing the memorandum. Although they abstained on the vote on the third memorandum, they voted for the budget based on it. They lost 3 of their 17 MPs in the process. It is hard to see them as occupying a position on the political spectrum with much of a future, although they are holding steady in the polls.

As to Pasok, it is hard to consider them to be part of the left in any sense any more. The name, Panhellenic Socialist Movement, does not fit it at all. It is the party of the memorandum, which Yiannis Tolios has called 'a manual of social counter-revolution'.⁹ The people who have been betrayed have taken their revenge and the party has collapsed, even though it goes sputtering on, particularly in the person of their unattractive and unpopular party leader, Evangelos Venizelos. His tv appearances and parliamentary speeches bring forth waves of revulsion on the social media, especially during his venomous attacks on the left. Pasok is still in government, despite going down to 12.3% in the elections and plunging further in subsequent polls. Many are moving from Pasok to Syriza, which is problematic for Syriza. They need to grow, but not in a compromising social democratic direction. Not that all ex-Pasok people are pulling to the right. MP Sofia Sakarofa, for example, a former champion javelin thrower, is a radical and eminent face of Syriza.

Past and present on the streets of Athens

In between all these encounters, I walked and watched and wondered. Why was this country, with its rich history and culture, at the cutting edge of this current phase in the restructuring of capitalism? How far would it go? I was focused on the current crisis, but I tried to conceive it in terms of a longer story. I was thinking a lot about ancient Athens, which lived in my imagination from the time I was a teenager and began studying the history of philosophy. It was outside the curriculum. It even had the frisson of forbidden fruit, because it was venturing outside catholic orthodoxy, which still had such a powerful hold. I was awed by the socratic (platonic) dialogues. Later I was convinced by the marxist critique of ancient Greek philosophy, especially by the work of British marxists Christopher Caudwell, George Thomson and Benjamin Farrington. Thomson's books *The First Philosophers* and *Aeschylus and Athens* had an honoured place on my bookshelves. These analyses showed the relation of abstract concepts to the shifting class structures of the ancient world. This critique did not dim the attraction of ancient Athens for me, but added a complexity that made it all the more intriguing. I taught the history of philosophy for many years and always did so with a strong emphasis on socio-historical context. I tried to make ancient Athens live in the imagination of students as it did in mine.

Adding further to the complexity is the question of the relation of the Greek left to Greek antiquity. It had been the Greek right who had always staked a claim to continuity with the glories of ancient Greece, to the point where the left sometimes rebuffed it. In the schools, the teaching of history has been dominated by a sense that Greeks created an advanced civilization, while the rest of the people of the world were still swinging from the trees. Now GD are taking it up in an even more aggressive way, encouraging students to turn on their foreign classmates as compromising this idealised hellenism.

I discussed the legacy of the ancient world with various people I met, especially historians and philosophers. Kostas Gavroglu pointed out the problematic nature of the continuity asserted by the right. They live in the same place and speak a form of the same language, but there has been much mixing of populations in the Balkans for centuries that modern Greeks are not the direct ancestors of the ancients. The Greek left, he commented, has veered between ignoring ancient traditions and adopting a milder form of the right view. Aristides Baltas said that it has been wrong for the Greek left to be so negative about classical Greece and to leave it to the right. He thinks that a more complex view of it is being taken now. Eugenia Siapera referred me to Cornelius Castoriadis and I found in his work one sort of interaction between past and present that I was seeking.¹⁰

I walked to the top of the Acropolis. I didn't focus on the exact dates and details and dimensions of it, but tried to imagine how life has flowed through this part of the world over the ages. I thought of those who erected these structures, those who lived and thought through the centuries here. I then visited the new Acropolis museum. It is impressive, but needs more in the way of a history-from-below dimension. I kept reciting to myself the great poem of Bertolt Brecht called *Questions from a worker who reads*, which begins "Who built Thebes of the seven gates? In the books, you will read the names of kings. But did the kings haul up the lumps of rock?" I reached for the lines of connection between the populations of these streets, ancient and modern. I also affirmed a continuity between the discourses of the ancient agora and my conversations with my contemporaries here. I didn't locate the brilliance of Athens only in its past.



View of Athens from the Acropolis

In my times alone I read novels that I hoped would thicken my sense of Greek history, as I have during all my previous trips to Greece. Some were disappointing, but *The Thread* by Victoria Hislop and *The House on Paradise Street* by Sofka Zinovieff definitely added time and texture to my vista.

I also walked the streets and squares of the contemporary city, seeing the homeless carrying all their possessions everywhere they went, people searching bins for food, immigrants scrambling to sell things to passers by, junkies shooting up, rats scurrying across my path. Sometimes I averted my eyes and walked on quickly, because I didn't really know what to do. There were so many problems I couldn't solve or even engage with at a close level. As most leftists, I think that my job is to address the nature of the system and to struggle to change it, but sometimes feel at a loss as to how to help the suffering humanity, who cross our path one by one. Once I was sitting alone in a taverna on the street and a man came up and said he was hungry in a shy and shamed way. I gave him a skewer of souvlaki from my plate and offered him bread from the basket on the table. He seemed so grateful for so little. Mostly when approached in cafés I was in company and engaged in conversation and didn't welcome being asked to buy tissues or flowers or whatever and all involved had a brief, awkward and unsatisfactory encounter.

Every day, sometimes several times a day, I came across demonstrations. If I was free, I joined them and asked them about their grievances and goals. I spoke to occupying factory workers, protesting students, journalists, doctors, pharmacists, lawyers, etc. The protest culture was evident, not only in bodies on the streets, but on writing on the walls. Athens must be the graffiti capital of the world. In Exarchia, there is scarcely a space without it. It is in various languages, although mostly in Greek. When I asked a Greek what was being said on a particular wall, he responded: "Many angry things about troika, government, police." Perhaps the most striking of what I saw was in English in gigantic red letters on the wall of the Academy of Athens, near the presiding statues of Socrates and Plato. It read: "Capitalism is killing you. Fascism won't save you." At the taverna in Exarchia that I adopted as my local, one wall of it proclaimed "Our Streets".



At the Academy of Athens

There is a strong anarchist presence in Athens. You see their A symbol everywhere. Aristides told me that anarchists are voting now. The communist tradition is ever present too. The hammer and sickle is also everywhere. One day, while walking in Exarchia, I heard strains of *Avanti popolo* wafting through the air, although I couldn't locate its source.

One in three shops in Athens is boarded up or burnt out. Of those open, there didn't seem to be much happening in many of them. I entered the posh department store Attica, although not for shopping, and went up and down the escalator to reach the facility I required, and saw little evidence of shopping on any of its floors. I wondered how many of the workers standing idle would keep their jobs.

The atmosphere in Athens is being compared to that of Berlin during the Weimar Republic.¹¹ The high unemployment, fascist threat, street fighting, political paralysis, personal anomie and so many features of these streets did echo in me what I imagine those other streets were like at that time.

So many sectors are in disarray and decline. Hospitals are running out of crucial medicines and supplies. Universities are in turmoil over new structures of governance, cuts in funding, loss of staff. The neoliberalisation of universities, underway everywhere, is more coercive and more resisted here. That restructuring of Greek debt last spring, which sounded good from afar, meant that Greek public sector institutions, which were required to deposit a portion of their funding with the Bank of Greece in government bonds, had their deposits reduced by 60%. The disarray in the universities is one more impetus to the brain drain, as the society is hemorrhaging its intellectuals and other skilled workers. The mainstream media is controlled by oligarchs and hostile to the left. There is much in the way of alternative media, but the circulation of *Avgi* is only 3000 a day and the audience of Red-fm is limited. Journalists who try to break stories of scandals and many forms of corruption are fired and even arrested. The Lagarde list of Greeks with accounts in one Swiss bank was suppressed by previous governments and then Kostas Vaxevanis was arrested for publishing it in *Hot Doc*. Everyone tells me so many stories, with vivid examples from their own sectors, while seeing that parallel processes proceed everywhere, except in the enclaves of the oligarchs. Every day was filled with tales of woe and symptoms of sociocide.



17 October 2012: journalists on 24 hour strike, while doctors, pharmacists, dentists, lawyers on 48 hour strike

Life has become menacing on so many levels. Even insect bites are no longer just irritating, but now threatening, as malaria has returned to Greece. Although the solidarity networks and protests have brought an enhanced sense of community, there have been countervailing patterns in evidence too, as people push and even trample each other for free food supplies. Desperation surrounds food. People are asked to put stale bread and other still edible food in bags hanging on the outside of bins to save scavenging and contamination. The bags disappear quickly. I was surprised at how many men I saw fingering worry beads. I had associated these with very old men in kafeneions on islands, but saw young men walking the city streets with them, including a riot cop on duty.

So many were so visibly suffering. Yet the Plaka was full of tourists, especially Americans on cruises, who didn't see it. They spent a few days each in various countries without touching anything real in any of them. The chatter I overheard was about food and shopping. Some remarked that it didn't really seem so bad. I suppose that it didn't in their 5 star hotels. Even I had moments, I have to admit, when the crisis seemed at bay. I wore my summer dresses and sandals the whole time I was there, in perfect weather most days. On a Sunday I walked around the national gardens and sat on the grass with hundreds of others listening to a symphony orchestra in gorgeous autumn sun. It seemed idyllic. Looking around, even the homeless seemed briefly released from their burdens.

There is humour amidst all the anxiety too. My twitter feed from Greece is full of ironic observation. One took note of George Papandreou, recently prime minister, now lecturing on crisis management at Harvard, because the captain of the Titanic is dead. Another advised undercover cops that their rayban aviators clashed with their hoodies and black bloc riot couture.

Although I normally walked, I did take taxis on a few occasions. One day, after walking a lot and thinking that I should save whatever walking energy I had left for the Acropolis, I found myself in conversation with a taxi driver who supported Golden Dawn. He listed crimes committed by immigrants. He admitted that they were not all criminals and insisted that he was not racist. He realised, he said, that they came to Greece for a better life, but they couldn't have it at the expense of Greeks. There are not the resources now. Scarcity changes the situation. People are living in fear. When people have problems, the police don't come, but GD do and clean up the mess.

Another taxi driver, who worked for a taxi company, told me that we worked 7 days a week on 12 hour shifts for 28 days a month for €900 a month. He had a job as a salesman for a company that went out of business a few years ago. He got the taxi job then, but it wouldn't be possible now. His wife works too, but they find it hard to manage. Still he thinks they are lucky, because he sees so much desperation as he drives around the streets of Athens all day and night. He votes Syriza. It offers some hope, he thinks. He supported the general strike the previous day.

A general strike

There have been approximately 27 general strikes in Greece since the start of the crisis. There have been many, very many, sectoral and local strikes. It is hard to think of any sector of the workforce that hasn't been on strike during the past 4 years. People in Ireland ask what have all these strikes accomplished. It can be argued that that they brought down two governments, although it is true that they have not mitigated any measures decreed by the troika, but the cumulative impact may be more evident eventually. The politics of the street have increasingly converged with the politics of the ballot box, as people see that it will take a new government to set the process along a new trajectory.

There was a general strike on 18 October when I was there. In the days preceding it, trade union posters went up all over central Athens. OXI (No) was the dominant message. That morning the hotel was shuttered down with minimal staff. Shops and factories were closed. Public services were suspended. Schools were closed. Flights were grounded. Little traffic was on the road. Riot buses were outside the hotel, as a contingent of PAME, communist workers, gathered to march to Omonia Square, where they would converge with other PAME contingents for an assembly before marching to Syntagma Square. PAME / KKE always march alone and do not mix with other union and political groupings. I walked to Omonia to take in the atmosphere. It was early yet, so there weren't many there, but there was a platform erected and red flags flying and militant communist music playing. It is the sort of music that always stirs up my feelings about the communist movement, a mixture of pride and loss. I ran into Damian Mac Con Uladh there. He briefed me on the canon of KKE music, which rejects much contemporary music as decadent, even the GDR version of pop music.

We walked together to the other gathering point at Pedion Areos, where the main trade unions organising public and private sector workers, the ADEDY and GSEE, and left formations, such as Syriza and Antarsya, were gathering. The ADEDY and GSEE, caught up for decades in habits of class collaboration, have become more militant with the severity of the crisis. The atmosphere here was more diverse, more relaxed, less regimented, more new left than old left. I met Syriza comrades, as arranged, in a café by the archeological museum. I chatted to Antarsya comrades as well. I met many new people, although briefly. Eventually we marched. Two comrades, Aliko Papadomichelaki and Lila Mambregianni, were solicitous in looking after me. Aliko has been politically active since the 1950s, speaks multiple languages and seems to know everything about the left everywhere. Lila was unemployed after the company for which she worked for 28 years closed and left her with no pension except what she receives from the state, but puts her energies to good use now in political activism. They interpreted the slogans for me and told me when to smear riopan on my face and when to put on the gas mask they gave me as we approached Syntagma Square. Some of the chants: "We won't let capitalism kill us." "History is made by people who don't obey." "The time of the left has come." "Athens, Madrid, Lisbon, Rome, all Europe." No mention of Dublin!



18 October 2012: general strike

In Syntagma Square, the atmosphere was menacing. Riot police were out in force. The air was full of chemicals. I felt some itching in my eyes, nose and throat, but I didn't get the worst of it. A bloc of professors had got the worst of it.

Enterprising immigrants were selling water, tissues and gas masks. Protesters were being forced to march around the perimeter rather than assembling inside the square. "What now?" I asked. "Nothing", said Lila, "Two years ago we had mothers and babies and we sang songs. We had concerts when we got to Syntagma Square. Now we just fight." People with children, home from school, because schools were closed, could not bring them into the chemical warfare and physical aggression of Syntagma Square. There were scuffles, chemical weapons, molotov cocktails, stun grenades, injuries, arrests. One man, a member of KKE, an unemployed seaman, who was marching with PAME, died, apparently of a heart attack. I marched on with Syriza around the square and then toward Omonia.

As it was coming up to 3pm and I had an appointment at the Plaza Hotel, I left them when we got to the university and headed back to Syntagma Square. I was to meet Giorgios Ayfantis, diplomatic advisor to Alexis Tsipras. The road into the square was blocked by riot police. I always make a point of arriving at appointments on time, so with normal determination and surprising calm, I walked right through them. I got away with it, presumably because I didn't look very combative. When I got to the hotel, it was shuttered down and a concierge said that I had better come inside, because there was trouble brewing just outside it. Then they shut down completely, meaning that I was locked in and he was locked out, ascertaining each other's position by mobile phone. Being a wily Athenian, however, he found his way in through the back and we had an enlightening conversation. He is a career diplomat. He was born into the Greek elite. His father was a judge. He attended an American school in Greece. He joined the KKE when younger, but was expelled from it. He listed his postings in the diplomatic service, but didn't spend long talking about the past. He spoke more of the future. There will be much tension between the EU and a left government in Greece. Angela Merkel will find summits where Alexis Tsipras will be there as prime minister to be a nightmare, he predicted. There will be problems at home too. "There will be no velvet revolution in Greece", he said, repeating a sentence that I heard many times in Athens. The Greek oligarchy will not give up lightly. However, the oligarchs no longer control the military. The police would be more of a problem. He spoke of submarines and prisons and trade relations and natural resources and many other matters, where I can't recall details, but formed an impression that there is much concrete and sober strategic thinking at play here.

The party leader

Speaking of Alexis Tsipras, I was struck by how proud Syriza people are of him without any trace of personality cult. He is young, attractive, intelligent, even charismatic. He became a global superstar in the international media between the May and June elections. There were attempts in mainstream media to undermine him, concentrating on his youth and inexperience. Reuters revealed to the world that he was 'no working class hero'. Why? Because he has a postgraduate degree in engineering. In August *Der Spiegel* listed him as among 'the 10 most dangerous European politicians.' In Greece, the right cast him as irresponsible and inexperienced, while the left (outside of Syriza) accuse him of being too compromising. Some compare him to the young Andreas Papandreou and imply that he will disappoint accordingly. He will almost certainly be the next prime minister. It is true that he is inexperienced in governance, but many Greeks want someone not tied into the experience of what governance has been in Greece until now. Syriza people point out that he is intelligent and he listens. They say that he is modest and he learns quickly. One criticised a speech he had given recently as too technocratic, but amended this with an account of a press conference he gave the next day where he dealt with political economy in a most astute way. Even those who hold positions to the left of him within Syriza think that he is the appropriate leader. I asked Nikos Potamitis if he is as impressive as he seems. "Even more so" he replied.



Alexis Tsipras

A number of the criticisms of Tsipras are made against Syriza itself. People say that they have moved to the right with the prospect of electoral success. “They water their wine”, several people said to me. “They want to manage capitalism, not to create socialism”, others added. When I put these criticisms to Syriza people, they reject them firmly. They insist that they have not moved to the right, that they are not watering their wine, that they do want to create socialism. Yes, they want to manage capitalism in the interests of working people in the immediate aftermath of forming a government, but they want to do so in the direction of moving toward socialism. It is not possible to do everything at once, but they will institute a radical democratic transformation from the very beginning, combining forms of direct democracy with representative structures. They will reverse the austerity cuts, restore wages and pensions, and redistribute wealth and power in a way that is not yet socialism, but is intended to open a new path to socialism for the 21st century.

The EU and the euro are problematic areas between Syriza and others on the left. Even within Syriza, there are those who are for exiting the eurozone. The KKE opposes the EU itself as imperialist. Syriza sees the EU, as the state itself, as a site of struggle in relation to the euro, debt and much else. They are aware, however, that they will face serious opposition from the EU and may be forced out of both the EU and eurozone. There is much plan b thinking about such scenarios.

Continuing engagement

There was much to think about as I returned to Dublin after eleven intense days in Athens and continued my engagement with Greece from a distance. In fact, the next day a Syriza MP gave a talk in Dublin. It was an ill-fated event, organised by the ULA, in which nothing went right. The time, date and venue had been changed several times over. The speaker missed his flight. A poster for it had cropped the KKE logo from the iconic photo of protesters at the Acropolis calling for peoples of Europe to rise up, which caused controversy first in Dublin and then an attack on Syriza by the KKE translated into multiple languages, despite the fact that Syriza has no part in the design of the poster and the ULA had apologised to both Syriza and KKE. ¹² It was farcical. The speaker Ioannis Stathas, an industrial worker who came from Pasok, was first elected to parliament in May. He spoke of the crisis and the necessity to resist. Having seen monuments of the Easter Rising and other such events in Irish history that day, he told us that we were not living up to our revolutionary history. The Irish left needed less beer and more history, he preached. He was asked serious questions about unity amidst diversity in Syriza, about issues of sabotage and security if they came to power, about what intellectual resources were being drawn on, on which he failed to shed much light. He showed little regard for theory and indicated that praxis was all. He did feel he had to say that revolutions were not made by people with grey hair. I felt that I had to stand up for the role being played by critical marxism in Syriza, as well as for its exponents with grey hair. The encounter did underline for me the diversity of Syriza, which includes attitudes I contest.

During the following days, I kept up with what was happening as best I could through the internet and telephone. I frequented various Greek portals using computer translations, which were sometimes enlightening, but sometimes bewildering. I was continually grateful to those blogging and tweeting from Greece in English. I followed the general strikes and big marches via live stream video in one window and the twitter feed in another. I was riveted to it on 7 November, as the third memorandum was being voted on in parliament and massive crowds gathered, shouting and singing, with much drama both inside and outside the parliament. At one stage Syriza MPs came out of the parliament and stood with a defiant banner above the square, while the crowd down in the square went wild with affirmation. Despite the fact that the supreme court ruled the latest austerity measures unconstitutional, the parliament passed them anyway, although in a close vote, losing MPs on the government side along the way.

I learned the important days on the Greek protest calendar: 28 October is Oxi day, a national holiday to mark the day Greece said no to Mussolini in 1940, but is now a big day to say no to the troika. 17 November celebrates the Polytechnic uprising of 1973 that led to the end of the junta. 6 December commemorates the death of Alexandros Grigoropoulos in 2008, which led to a youth-initiated uprising. This year Exarchia was in flames once again. In between, there were many protests and sectoral strikes and occupations of factories, town halls and universities. Left students at University of Athens occupied the central IT system for several days in November. Not much of this made mainstream international news. When I heard people saying that things had gone quiet in Greece, I knew that it was only because they were not listening.

Left intellectuals in London

On 8 November I went to the 9th annual Historical Materialism conference in London, for a very intense 4 days. Most of those participating in it were both academics and activists, combining critical thought and research into the historical process with a sense of responsibility for moving history forward. There were more questions than answers and openness to a variety of positions. The atmosphere of orthodoxy and denunciation that once characterised the relations of different factions of the left was absent here. There were 10 simultaneous sessions going on through the days and packed plenaries in the evenings. The 800+ people were from all over the world, various political traditions of the left and different stages of the life cycle. In my own presentation, I attempted a historical materialist analysis of the occupy movement. There were people at it who participated in this movement elsewhere and it once again became clear that the same patterns played out in many parts of the world. The relationship of the occupy movement to the movement of the squares in Spain and Greece and the protest movement in Russia was a theme across various sessions. Another big theme of the conference was interrogating the history of the communist movement, although the central focus was the current crisis and the left's response to it.

I had occasion to speak with comrades from all over the world, as well to further my engagement with the Greek left through Greeks presenting at it. Most of them seemed more inclined toward Antarsya than Syriza, but I found them well worth hearing. Eirini Gaitanou gave a paper on feminism in Greece and highlighted the effects of the crisis on the lives of women. Giorgos Kalampokas gave a very gramscian analysis of the struggle for hegemony in Greece, arguing the need to set in motion institutions for transforming everyday life and for providing counterpower, even to a left government. Other Greeks too spoke from platform and floor on crisis, resistance, alternatives. I was pleased to meet Panagiotis Sotiris, who has been assiduous at informing international audiences of the struggles in Greek universities, especially through edufactory. He has noted a new flourishing of theoretical debate and production by students and academics being forged in the combination of political activism with theoretical work.¹³ I was very happy to meet Michalis Spourdalakis again. It was as if we were old friends already. We spoke at various intervals and then had a long talk on the tube before exiting for different terminals at Heathrow to return to Athens and Dublin. He spoke at the conference on the strategy of Syriza that accounted for its rise and its potential to bring real social transformation to Greece and to Europe.

There is a Syriza branch in London. Among their other activities, they have seminars, which are made available on video, which I watch with appreciation. There was one on 7 December, where speakers included Stathis Kouvelakis and Costas Douzinas. Douzinas, professor of law at Birkbeck, memorably said “You’re never ready to fall in love or have a revolution.” He described an emerging scenario where popular will, political agency and catalyst were coming together, bringing Syriza to a rendezvous with history.¹⁴

PIIGS

On 14 November there was a day of co-ordinated general strikes and protests in Europe, organised by the trade unions, which was a big step forward for the left. There were massive turnouts elsewhere, but not in Ireland. The Irish Congress of Trade Unions (ICTU), when asked, said they supported it, but had nothing planned for the day, but they were mobilising for 24 November. The ICTU has failed to organize appropriately during the crisis, particularly since the Labour Party entered government. The Dublin Council of Trade Unions (DCTU), with a more militant history, did get 20,000 out on the 24 November. The ULA organised a demonstration in solidarity on 14 November, which I attended. It was sad to see so little from Ireland on this day. In the evening I gave a talk on Greece at a ULA meeting. The big question on everyone’s mind was: How can we build a Syriza here?



14 November 2012 in Dublin, but mostly elsewhere in Europe

On the day someone tweeted: “This little piggy didn’t come out to strike.” I had been noticing that PIIGS was increasingly being spelled PIGS. It seemed that the narrative of Irish exceptionalism, promoted both by our government and the troika, was prevailing, even among the international left, who sometimes don't rate us as part of a common struggle. We are trying, even if we fail to mobilise in such numbers, partly because our fellow citizens do not see that what is being tested in Greece is what is in store for the rest of us. The lowering of wages, the shrinking of social welfare, the privatising of public assets are not meant to be temporary measures. They are core to the restructuring of capitalism well underway in Ireland and elsewhere.

I have noted for some months the call from Alexis Tsipras for solidarity of the southern periphery. More specifically, he has put forward a proposal for an EU conference on debt calling for write down for south.¹⁵ Why does he never mention Ireland? What about our debt? Our debt is perhaps the most unjust of all, as it based on forcing private debts on to us as public debts. In fact, Ireland, while only 0.9% of the EU population, has paid 42% of cost of the European banking crisis.¹⁶

The Syriza conference

On 30 November and 1-2 December, the Syriza conference was held in the Peace & Friendship Stadium in Athens to move forward the re-foundation of Syriza as a unified party. Prior to this, some 30,000+ registered as individual members and elected 3000+ delegates in sectoral and thematic areas. There are now around 500 branches in localities and workplaces.

Previously unaffiliated members now form the majority of Syriza. Alexis Tsipras addressed the conference saying "History is calling us to be the new party of 21st century socialism... All of Europe is looking to us to be the spark that starts the fire." Aristides Baltas presented the manifesto he had been drafting while I was there, which had been subjected to widespread discussion, which was passed 'almost unanimously'.

I followed it all as best I could through skype, texting, web portals, etc. I especially enjoyed a slideshow of the conference showing formal speeches and informal conversation, of pensive faces and happy faces, of male and female, young and old, participants. On the soundtrack was Bob Dylan singing "The times they are a changin'", setting off strong resonances of the convergences of old and new in a left fit for these times.

There were two lists for the 300+ central committee, a left platform and a heterogenous other list. I recognised names on both. The left platform articulated a left critique of the majority position gathered around Tsipras. Names associated with the left platform are: Panayiotis Lafazanis, parliamentary spokesman, Yiannis Tolios, marxist economist, Grigoris Kalomoiris and Despoina Spanou, trade union representatives, Stathis Kouvelakis, marxist theoretician based in London, Nikos Potamitis in Zakynthos. Also in London is economist Costas Lapavistas, who co-operates closely with Syriza, whose writings are influential for left platform. This trend considers that no viable solution will be found with the foreign lenders and so a Syriza government should be prepared for a break with the EU when the circumstances make it appropriate and necessary.

The result was 25%-75% in favour of the Tsipras majority. Despite some readings of this on social media, it is my understanding that relations between the left platform and the rest are characterised more by healthy debate than by hostile contestation. The left platform puts a strong emphasis on seeking allies to the left, specifically KKE and Antarsya, and not to the right, and on reversing austerity by all means necessary.

The KKE responded to the declaration by accusing Syriza of taking positions and even terminologies of KKE, instead of recognising their common traditions and positions. In his conference speech, Tsipras expressed what many expressed to me, that this hostility from forces of the left was hard to understand and caused them grief. This is especially the case with those who have come from the KKE, as Tsipras and many others have. I watched most of a three hour video of an event celebrating the 94th anniversary of the KKE. There were lots of red flags waving and thousands singing the songs of Theodorakis. There was a rousing rendition of the *Internationale* at the end. I was moved by it all and felt such a longing for them to step up to play the historic role that they could play now at this crucial juncture in the history of the great Greek left.

Into 2013

It is 2013 now. The year began in turmoil with police raids on squats and fire bombings and shootings, whether in retaliation or distraction from ongoing debate on the Lagarde list and from legislation enabling public property to be seized by the nation's creditors. On 19 January 2013, there was an international mobilisation against fascism initiated in Athens, where there was a march from Omonia and a big concert in Syntagma Square. I was honoured to be asked to be one of the artists and intellectuals sponsoring the call for it. Dublin was among the cities that answered the call. We marched from Stephen's Green to the Greek embassy. I spoke there, connecting the rise of fascism to the global economic crisis.



19 January 2013 in Dublin

What next?

What will be the next act in this consequential drama? Greece will continue to be a caldron of class conflict, for sure, but will it climax in a breakthrough in this high stakes struggle for power? Will it move on from critique and resistance to transformation? How long will the present government last? Will a left government succeed it? Will it be able to withstand the monumental, even terroristic, pressures that would be brought to bear upon it? Will it be able to stand against the global plutocracy? Will it be able to resist the cyclone ripping through our world? Will it be able to break the power of t-i-n-a and bring forth a real alternative? Will it be able to forge a new path to socialism, not only for Greece, but for us all?

Greece is a crucible, where the best and worst of our civilisation are in high energy collision with each other. This is not some local battle. These cuts to pay, pensions and public services, this privatisation of public property, this redistribution of wealth from below to above: these are not temporary contingent measures. These are integral to a systemic restructuring of capitalism. It has advanced through Europe already from east to west. Where there were once experiments in socialism in the east, there are now oligarchies. Now advances achieved by the labour movement in the west are to be stripped.

Greece has shown where the process is going, but it also offers an alternative: an example of critique, resistance and preparation for reconstruction. We need to stand with them for their sake, as well as ours. Haris Golemis, elected to the central committee of Syriza, puts it to us: "No political success in a single European country can be sustainable if it is not followed, within a short time, by similar successes in other countries. A progressive island in a reactionary archipelago is a thing of the past".¹⁷ It has echoes of the socialism in one country debate all those decades ago. The tasks seem monumental, both for them and us. Yiannis Tolios, an economist, also elected to the central committee, articulates the problem starkly: "If having socialism in a single country is considered hard, having socialism in all countries at the same time is nearly impossible."¹⁸ Greece needs to forge ahead, whether the rest are ready or not, but it is a perilous path.

In Athens I felt at the edge of history. I see Dublin more clearly as a result. It is time for a new initiative on the left here in Ireland and I feel a responsibility to pursue that. The ULA is unraveling. There is need for something broader and better than anything we have created so far. Let's see if we can rise to that. I'll return to Greece to continue to feel the pulse of the global process and to try to convince others in Ireland and elsewhere that we cannot continue to live as we are. Capitalism is killing us. Only socialism can save us.

Notes:

Thanks to everyone who spoke to me in Zakynthos and Athens, not only those named above, but to those unnamed too. Thanks to all who talked politics to me in all of my previous times in Greece. Sadly Thanasis Anapolitanos has passed beyond where I can thank him. When I first went searching for Synaspismos in the early 1990s to write an article on Greek society and the Greek left, Synaspismos in Athens put me in contact with him in Rhodes and he received me most hospitably. He was a most impressive activist. He died on 8 January 2013. Thanks to all who have written about Greece in recent months, especially to tweeps who have kept me right up to the moment: @irategreek, @teacherdude, @inflammatory, @asteris, @keeptalkinggr, @northaura, @yiannisbab, @damomac, @veriasa, etc. Thanks to Christos Kefalis, who looked over this article before publication and made suggestions. Thanks to Donagh Brennan for the excellent work he does at *Irish Left Review*.

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¹ Crucible: 1) a vessel made of a refractory substance such as graphite or porcelain, used for melting and calcining materials at high temperatures, 2) a severe test, as of patience or belief; a trial, 3) a place, time, or situation characterized by the confluence of powerful intellectual, social, economic, or political forces.

² <http://www.forbes.com/sites/billfrezza/2011/07/19/give-greece-what-it-deserves-communism/>

³ <http://www.amazon.com/Discordia-ebook/dp/B009HVO1JW>

⁴ <http://www.redpepper.org.uk/greece-syriza-shines-a-light/>

⁵ <http://www.left.gr/article.php?id=8376>

⁶ <http://www.rednotebook.gr/>

⁷ <http://transform-network.net/network/transform-members.html>

⁸ <http://www.poulantzas.gr/>

⁹ <http://www.readpoint.com/book.aspx?id=523687>

¹⁰ <http://www.scribd.com/doc/59305496/Castoriadis-Philosophy-Politics-Autonomy-Essays-in-Political-Philosophy>

¹¹ <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-20105881>

¹² <http://inter.kke.gr/News/news2012/2012-10-24-lathroxireia-syriza>

¹³ <http://www.isj.org.uk/index.php?id=871&issue=137>

¹⁴ <http://socialistresistance.org/4365/syriza-youre-never-ready-to-fall-in-love-or-have-a-revolution>

¹⁵ <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2012/dec/09/greek-opposition-european-debt-conference>

¹⁶ <http://notesonthefront.typepad.com/politicaconomy/2013/01/with-considerable-speculation-about-an-impending-deal-on-bank-debt-with-the-taoiseach-and-the-german-chancellor-jointly-sta.html>

¹⁷ <http://transform-network.net/blog/blog-2012/news/detail/Blog/coping-with-the-challenge-posed-by-the-crisis.html>

¹⁸ <http://www.readpoint.com/book.aspx?id=523687>