Syriza

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Inside the Labyrinth

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CHAPTER ONE

Between Things Ended and Things Begun

'We won. I actually don't know how I feel: we've never won before.'

With eyes moistening, retired pharmacist Dimitris Vassos spoke for many of his generation of the left as crowds gathered in the early hours in the centre of Athens to hear Syriza leader Alexis Tsipras make his victory speech. Throughout the night votes coming in from the big cities to the islands inched towards an historic victory for the forces of the left, whose forebears had gone through civil war, exile, exclusion from public life and violence at the hands of the state and of the shadowy forces connecting it to the far right. Under Greece's proportional electoral system the tally of Syriza MPs in the 300-seat parliament started ahead, stayed ahead and crept towards the 151 seat threshold for an absolute majority. It was tantalisingly close. But by the small hours as I sat with friends urging on the total with single-figure vote totals from the most remote hamlets flashing across the screen the final result became clear – 149 seats.

Texts and online messages from friends across Europe seemed more perturbed that the radical left had fallen just two seats short of an absolute majority than any of my long-standing friends in Greece. One Greek journalist colleague, with whom I had shared assignments in the Balkans, remarked with good humour and mock exasperation, 'I hope people abroad realise what has happened here. People died to keep the left alive in Greece. And now we are back, after many obituaries and not a few self-inflicted wounds.' He added, with a wry pause, 'This is the beginning of something … We'll just have to see what that something is.' Giorgos's was not a cynical affectation. It

was a prescient grasp upon the manifold conflicts the election of a government of the left would open up over the next six months.

Syriza, which stands for the Coalition of the Radical Left, was going to form a government. It was the first time in the history of Greece that such a force had won an election and formed an administration under its own name. 'Left' had a distinct meaning in Greece. It is one of those European countries in which the main political party of working-class people for much of the twentieth century was not a Labour-type, social democratic party – as in Britain or Germany – but a Communist Party or, in the case of Syriza, a development out of a once monolithic Communist tradition which had undergone a series of fractures. Left meant of the Communist heritage – that is of the historical tradition which was held by defenders of Western capitalism to be anti-democratic, and therefore rejected by free people in free elections. In any case, it was all meant to have been swept aside a generation ago, when the Berlin Wall came down. Communists had occasionally been in government elsewhere in Western Europe. But, with the exception of Cyprus, it had been as the much junior partner to larger social democratic parties – as in France in the early 1980s. The standard bearer of social democracy – Labour, to use the exceptionally British equivalent term – in Greece was Pasok. It had governed for most of the previous 35 years before crashing to 4.7 per cent on 25 January 2015 – a tenth of the vote it had been used to. That was one indication of the political earthquake which had hit this country of 11 million people, known fondly to most through hazily recalled ancient mythology or equally misty memories of fun holidays, great beaches and cheap drinks. The bitter realities of austerity-wracked Europe over the past decade have provided other images, refracted through a corporate-controlled media. They give some picture of the social disaster which has befallen the country.

As the disaster hit from 2008 onwards, images of suffering served largely as a pretext for blaming the victims. Just as, domestically, the right-wing tabloids in Britain scapegoat the poor, the ill and

the marginalised, so they joined the elite chorus across Europe in demonising the people of a whole country. Greeks were lazy, had lied to get into the euro single currency, retired ridiculously early and spent their time sipping their drinks in the sun – all the while avoiding taxes and ripping off foreigners. The scale of tourism to Greece, one of its main earners, perversely provided some apparent evidence for the stereotype. The European elites projected that image of Greece through every media platform in the first half of 2015, as the new government tried to negotiate some relief within the European Union (EU) to crushing austerity. Every aspect of this image of the Greeks was a lie. Time is snatched through the demands and worries of work and monthly bills, which are common to the vast majority of people in the 28 countries of the EU, including Greece. But the experience millions of ordinary Europeans had of the country was of the relaxation, sunshine and the café culture they had enjoyed on their holidays. The more middle-brow 'cheating-Greeks' propaganda – which is what you get from the right-wing broadsheets and so much mainstream broadcasting – echoed two centuries of snobbery among the elites of Britain, Germany and France regarding southern Europe, and Greece in particular. In the grand tours of the European young aristocracy of the nineteenth century the adventurous would go as far as southern Italy. Only the hopelessly drunk or foolhardy would board a ship and head for the bandit lands of Greece. It was, in their imagination, rather eastern.

The identikit politicians of Europe dredged up that historical memory in response to Syriza's election victory. They held to an iron clad consensus that the way out of the deepest and most protracted economic crisis since the 1930s lay in cuts to welfare, slashing wages, rising unemployment and privatisation of remaining public assets. Greece, more than any other European country, had been the laboratory for those policies, bundled together under the dogma of austerity. In response, first came a wave of imaginative and combative movements against aspects of austerity – which included fanning

the flames of racism – and the succession of governments which pursued them. Then, in a crescendo rising from 2012 to January 2015, opposition broke through at the ballot box with the election of a left committed to a radical escape from the austerity labyrinth.

The arrogant assertion by Europe's elites that there was no alternative to the policies they were forcing on reluctant voters at home was belied by the ferocity of their response to the democratic choice made by the Greek people. Syriza won the election with a slogan of hope for an alternative path, a break with the austerity years. Offering no alternative paths of their own, the elites' reaction in Greece and elsewhere was fear and hatred. Behind the anti-Greek stereotypes they fell back on lay an instinctive understanding that they faced a problem much greater than the rebellious behaviour of working people in the south-eastern tip of the continent. The insurgency in Greece was a leading edge of a broader, twin rejection across Europe of the old politics and politicians. It was a revolt against three decades of an economic orthodoxy that twisted the whole of society around the interests of a fabulously wealthy few. As the German chancellor Angela Merkel led the way in early summer in trying to force Syriza to capitulate, she faced a whiff of the kind of popular resistance which had shaken Greece. The Greek drama was at a crunch point, but the German press in May and June was dominated by coverage of continuous strikes by rail workers and other industrial action from schools to the post office and hospitals. Greece, in myriad ways, was providing an example. For the old political order it had to be extirpated, not simply argued against. That is why, early on in the Syriza-led government's clashes with the Troika of lenders – the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the European Central Bank (ECB), and the European Commission (EC) – the usual rules of diplomatic politesse went out the window. Germany's finance minister Wolfgang Schäuble repeatedly tried to humiliate the Greek representatives. The belligerence of the Troika fuelled the media's coverage. One unintended consequence was that interest in the fate of Greece's new

government spread wider than the party-organised radical left seeking to emulate the example of the new Syriza government. Athens had potential allies. Not in official Europe, but among those suffering across the continent from the policies which Syriza was elected to end in Greece. A demonstration in March through Dublin against the Irish government introducing charges for water saw 80,000 people throng O'Connell Street. 'The main street in the capital was rammed with Greek flags,' an old friend and Irish MP, Richard Boyd Barrett, told me. 'The identification with Greece among ordinary Irish people is something I've never witnessed before.' Looking at the unfolding clash between Greece and the Troika, those wide layers of sympathisers with the Syriza government could find certain national particularities in developments in Greece. But they are specific features of a common experience.

Crisis of the old order

Greece has been the European country hardest hit by the global crisis unleashed following the financial crash of 2008. It is also the eurozone state – one of 19 which use the euro currency – upon which the most devastating austerity measures have been imposed by the Troika and successive Greek governments.

It is against that background that the Greek workers and social movements – popular campaigns, community struggles and the like – have sustained the highest levels of resistance to austerity and to an increasingly authoritarian state anywhere in Europe. Twentieth-century Greece had a turbulent history – two civil wars, six inter-state wars, occupation, dictatorship, coups and the overbearing role of the military in politics. That history is felt in the present. But Greece since the fall of the Colonels' Junta in 1974 proved to be remarkably stable – and modern. The Junta seized power in 1967. It was the only answer the monarchist right and its allies in the army had to the rising expectations of young people and to growing agitation by workers

against the especially repressive and exploitative features of modern Greek capitalism and its state. Both of those were firmly anchored in the Western camp of the Cold War. The coup of 21 April 1967 could not halt the rising tide of the 1960s as it surged into one country after another on both sides of the Cold War divide. But it could, temporarily, dam it up. The result was that when the dictatorship fell in 1974 it was as if seven years of suspended development was suddenly unleashed in concentrated form. In a sense, 1968 came to Greece in 1974. When it did, it was as if the anti-Vietnam War movement, Woodstock and the wave of worker radicalisation in Western Europe all happened at the same time.

The old order was rocked back on its heels and it was forced to adapt. The period following 1974 – the years of the *metapolitefsi*, or regime change – saw the creation of a new political settlement, with new political parties. The previous set up comprised a party of the left (a legal front for the banned Communist Party), a liberal, but anti-communist, pro-business party, and a right-wing, monarchist and militarist party. That political arrangement had failed in the 1960s to contain the left as a political force (the United Democratic Left shocked the Greek business class and generals by doing unexpectedly well in the general election of 1958) or to curb rising militancy by working people, students and young people, which burst onto the streets in July 1965. Hence the coup two years later. The new, post-coup arrangement required new parties. It also depended on a social compact. That meant the business class perforce granting concessions to workplace militancy and demands for welfare provision. The next four decades saw uninterrupted rule by the centre left and centre right, Pasok and New Democracy. We shall turn to them shortly, but for now the important point is that the political order which came crashing down in 2015 was not an aberrant hangover from Greek history. It was the very modern, very European, essentially two-party system of alternating rule between centre left and centre right, with both committed in the last 20 years to broadly the same policies.

The 1990s demonstrated the modernity of Greece, not its supposed Balkan mentality. While Balkan wars engulfed neighbouring Yugoslavia that decade, Greece smoothly joined the twenty-first-century project of the euro. It seemed, by the beginning of our century, that old Europe was ineluctably modernising – the south becoming more like the centrist, post-ideological north. In the person of Costas Simitis, Greece had had its own Blairite photocopy as prime minister between 1996 and 2004. Many of the politicians and commentators who claim now that the economic and social disaster in Greece is a result of its failure to modernise are the same people who, only a little over a decade ago, as the Athens Olympics took place, were hailing the success of the modernising prime ministerships of Pasok's Simitis and New Democracy's Constantinos Mitsotakis. Between them Pasok and New Democracy, with some smaller forces, implemented the shock therapy of austerity from 2009 to 2015. What the election results in January 2015 revealed was a popular backlash against the austerity parties on such a scale that it redrew the political map.

The ruins of the centre left

Most dramatic was the fate of Pasok. When party founder Andreas Papandreou closed his victorious election campaign in 1981 he spoke to a rally of nearly 1 million people (rather disturbingly, for anyone of the left, to the Teutonic foot-stomping of Carl Orff's 'Carmina Burana'). In January 2015, Pasok limped over the 3 per cent threshold for representation in the parliament. Andreas Papandreou was from one of the great dynasties which dominated Greek politics during the last century and which were as important as ideology in the formation of governing alliances and political parties. His son, George, became prime minister in 2009 and signed up to the Troika's memorandum, which began the austerity programme. Pasok, under a new leader, collapsed to third place in the 2012 elections. George Papandreou left to found his own party – the Movement of Democratic Socialists. It

failed to get over the 3 per cent threshold. When Andreas broke from the liberal centre in the 1970s to form Pasok, he could claim justification in splitting the centre bloc against the monarchist right because he was giving a genuine voice to the social democratic left, independent from the liberals. It is a mark of the degeneration of the centre left that his son tried to provide a voice only for the Papandreous. And it was not to be heard beyond their own parlour. Complacent social democratic leaders elsewhere should take note. One outgrowth of the crisis of Pasok was the proliferation of other centre-left parties attempting to occupy its space. The old saw about the radical, socialist left – that it is forever split into micro, rival groups – applies to today's centre left in Greece. One formation which did make it into the parliament was To Potami (The River). It had been created overnight in 2014 to fight the European Parliament elections. Very much a media confection, it is the creation of TV presenter Stavros Theodorakis (no relation to the famous left-wing composer Mikis). In so doing, Theodorakis was merely following a venerable tradition – in Greece and elsewhere – of charismatic figures founding their own political vehicles. But whereas the Papandreou and Karamanlis clans could draw on great reserves of social capital in launching their political projects (Pasok and New Democracy) in the 1970s, The River is somewhat shallow.

Theodorakis made his name with a TV show called *The Protagonists*. It took up sympathetically the stories of the 'marginalised' – prisoners, Roma and so on. Nothing wrong with that, especially given the harsh social policies of every Greek government in the crisis years. But for Theodorakis these scandals were aberrations from the civilised European norm. So the political logic was already clear before he launched the party. Greece needed more moderating influence from Brussels, Berlin and Paris to trim the old national-traditionalists, of left and right, who revelled in chauvinism rather than euro-cosmopolitanism. His message was amplified within the echo chamber of the European media, who largely shared with their fellow TV presenter an outlook of modernising liberalism.

The problem – as Theodorakis found out – is that scapegoating Muslims, persecuting Roma, suspending human rights provisions, and bullying opponents are not the preserve of the benighted Balkans. They are the policy, programme and political reflex of the whole of the European establishment in the crisis years.

In the course of the election campaign the pro-business thrust of Theodorakis's centrism became more apparent. The truth is that there is no such thing as a centre which preserves pristine equidistance between the poles of left and right. The centre has beliefs. The Liberal Democrats in Britain showed theirs by staying in coalition with the most vicious of Tory governments for five years solid. The TV presenter is against the left on the whole. He refused to join the social democratic left in the European Parliament. Some confused commentators imputed a principled and radical stance to that decision: that he was against all the old crooks. In reality, he wants nothing whatsoever to do with the left. He made that clear as Syriza took office and faced the wrath of the Troika. To Potami sought to undermine the government and force the creation of a national unity coalition which would be committed to the austerity regime the voters had rejected. One example serves to show the depths of To Potami's commitment to big business and the thinness of its claim to be a champion of human rights. The Syriza-led government tabled measures to liberalise Greece's inhuman prison conditions in April. On television, Theodorakis is the supposed champion of the rights of the marginalised – including prisoners – yet his party voted against the provisions. In the following months his anti-leftism became even more pronounced. The liberal Theodorakis took up the themes of the old authoritarian right.

The three-headed centre right

Across Western Europe the decades of post-war stability allowed for a channelling of politics from the mass, violent clashes of the 1930s

into the more pacific conduits of parliamentary democracy. Christian Democracy emerged – or, rather, was crafted with great resource and effort – as a broad church for a range of right and centre-right forces which had, in the interwar years, fought for political power under their own banners: national conservatives, industrialists, religious conservatives, liberals, fascists … right-wing chancers of all kinds.

In Greece the process was delayed and took a peculiar course. That was due to the anti-Communist civil war of 1945–9 and the entrenching in power – backed by the US and Britain – of a monarchist, authoritarian right for whom political violence was customary. There could be no return for the Greek capitalist class to monarcho-military methods after the fall of the Junta in 1974. A referendum held in that year abolished the monarchy. Instead, they cohered around the patrician figure of Constantine Karamanlis, who had remained outside Greece during the coup years and returned to found the New Democracy party. Italian Christian Democracy had had the luxury of 20 years to meld together competing right-wing forces (bound together by golden threads of corruption of Croesus proportions, the mafia and the immense social resources of the Catholic Church). New Democracy had to do it all in the course of the tempestuous mid 1970s.

One consequence was that New Democracy was dominated by old-style paternalistic politicians of the right. The familial and institutional connections with the traditionally anti-democratic establishment remained strong.

At the same time, like the rest of the centre right in the 1980s and 1990s, it tried to be the party of economic liberalism – in the Thatcher-Reagan model. In popular appeal, however, national conservative themes of patriotism, religious Orthodoxy, anti-Communism and anti-immigrant racism played heavily.

These tensions within New Democracy burst out in 2010 when George Papandreou signed up to the first austerity memorandum. New Democracy leader Antonis Samaras came from the national