

Latest from Greece: Changing Europe

Contributed by Mark Sargent

LETTER FROM GREECE #26: The Future is here

Â

"We are going to destroy the basis upon which they have built for decade after decade a system, a network that viciously sucks the energy and the economic power from everybody else in society," Yanis Varoufakis, the new Finance Minister of Greece, speaking to and about the elite oligarchies that have run Greece and its fortunes into the ground for lo these many years.Â Didn't mention firing squads, alas, but hey, seegah seegah (slowly slowly) as they say in Greece.Â Â

Â

The nation is fascinated with the new.Â How often does a Western democracy completely shed itself of the same-old-shit.Â None of these people, the new SYRIZA government, have ever had their hands on power.Â We watch every event and gesture the new government makes, arguing over the symbolism.Â As an election night crowd surged in Syntagma Square with the arrival of the victorious Alexis Tsipras, leader of SYRIZA, the loud speakers surrounding the square rang out with The Clash's "Rocking the Kasbah."Â After a robust speech that hinted we weren't in Kansas anymore, rife with the language of the Left, he's not a brilliant speechmaker, but earnest and as everyone notes, seemingly imperturbable, he wandered the stage waving at the roaring crowd and from the PA boomed Leonard Cohen intoning,

Â

"They sentenced me to 20 years of boredom,
For trying to change the system from within,
I'm coming now, I'm coming to reward them,
First we take Manhattan, then we take Berlin."

Â

We rocked back in our chairs, ah, that's what we're talking about.Â And certainly better, though not more appropriate, than Dylan's "Everything is Broken."

Â

Soon after being sworn in as Prime Minister, a civil ceremony, no pappas, Tsipras visited the Kessariani memorial where during the German occupation the Nazis executed 200 Communist partisans, where he laid flowers.Â Not the traditional tomb of the unknown soldier.Â And the nation nodded, yes, of course.Â Â

Â

Every morning we ask, Where is Tsipras today?Â And where is Varoufakis?Â Our finance minister has been dashing about Europe chatting up his fellow finance ministers.Â With his easy going charm, sharp looks and excellent English, Varoufakis has become the media darling of the English language press.Â They're everywhere.Â Yesterday they were both in Brussels and then Tsipras went on to Paris and Varoufakis to Frankfurt where things didn't go so well.Â Today Yanis is in Berlin. Â

Â

"The pressure on Greece increased on Wednesday when the European Central Bank cut off direct funding to Greek banks, forcing them to rely instead on emergency loans from the country's own central bank. The move followed a meeting in Frankfurt between Mario Draghi, the central bank's president, and Yanis Varoufakis, Greece's new finance minister, and appeared to signal a hard line in negotiations over debt."

Â

My friend John Psaropoulos (excellent commentary on things Levantine: www.thenewathenian.com) says the effect will not be immediate.

Â

"Wednesday's decision should not affect the liquidity of Greek banks in the short term, because they have reduced their Greek bond purchases and have instead issued state-guaranteed bank bonds as collateral for ECB money. The ECB decision also allows Greek banks to continue to draw liquidity from the Greek central bank.

At the end of last year,Â Greek banks had borrowedÂ 63.23bn euros from the ECB and another 9.79bn from the Bank of Greece. Bank of Greece governor Yiannis Stournaras is due to travel to London next week, in a likely attempt to attract financing from outside the Eurozone."

Still, it's the style that attracts attention.

"A yawning gulf has opened in the world of financial diplomacy. It is not whether to bail out Greece yet again. It is how a Greek finance minister should dress when visiting a chancellor of the exchequer.Â Yanis Varoufakis arrived in Downing Street yesterdayÂ in black jeans, a mauve open-necked shirt that was not tucked in, and the sort of leather coat Putin might wear on a bear hunt. If George Osborne still didn't get the point, Varoufakis had aÂ No 1 haircut. What was going on?"Â Â The Guardian

Â

Sounds like Mario didn't give a shit about the shirt, or maybe he did.Â

Â

Now that Greece has the coolest Minister of Finance in the world, everything is up for grabs.Â The article above then went on to say that while finance ministers generally dressed like bankers, because that's what they are, Varoufakis is scaring the shit out them because he's definitely not a banker.Â It's about time.Â As far as I've understood, the no-tie style has long been a standard approach for communist leaders in Western Europe, the suit and tie being the uniform of Big Capitalism, the enemy.Â Vannesa Friedman of the NY Times weighed in:

"So how is Mr. Tsipras getting away with it?

I think the answer has to do with two things: 1. his commitment; and 2. our own accepted stereotypes.

Mr. Tsipras didn't wear a tie before he took office, and he is not wearing a tie now that he is in office: He is not flip-flopping with his success. He has wardrobe integrity, which may be extrapolated to policy and position. His consistency of dress is reliable, and whether or not we like to admit it, there is a human tendency to interpret that as a personal trait, not just a superficial style signature."Â

Wardrobe integrity, damn. That brings us around to who these guys are.Â In my last letter I stated that most of their campaign promises were rather tame social democrat themes but let's be clear, these guys are Marxists, which is something the Western press wants to ignore because the idea that a Western liberal democracy would turn to Marxists, communists, in a time of crisis is a little hard for them to swallow.Â This has occurred only once before in the West, in Chile in 1970 with the election of Salvador Allende, while Greece at the time was suffering under a military dictatorship.Â No one believes the Greek army is about to take power in a coup, but the question has been raised.Â And if this was 1970 history tells us that the West, and especially the U.S., would have been very active in attempting to manipulate the outcome.Â But that was the Cold War which has been replaced by the War on Terror.Â Americans, they gotta have a war.Â Next up, a war on obesity.Â What's that about?Â It doesn't appear that SYRIZA is about to embark on a great program of socialist egalitarianism but they give every impression that they would like to.Â But first they must bail out the ship of state which is taking on a lot of water.

Â

"Every day, the marsupial clouds grow hungrier for our reunion."

Cate Marvin

Â

"But Syriza is emphatically not a Euroskeptic party, which is one reason why the Greek Communist Party will have nothing to do with it. Its aim—and the aim of the thousands of European leftists and left sympathizers who were celebrating in Athens last night—is not to destroy the Union but to reclaim it from the bankers and the money men for the European people."Â

Maria Margaronis, The Nation

Â

A tall order, but why not?Â For an in depth look at the coalition that is SYRIZA, Stathis Kouvelakis, professor at Kings College, London and a member of the SYRIZA central committee,Â holds forth in an interview in Jacobin.Â

<https://www.jacobinmag.com/2015/01/syriza-greece-victory-kouvelakis-left/>

It's a lengthy piece with a good deal of traditional left thinking such as this:

"On the one hand, we see a confirmation of the attitude of Gramscian-Poulantzian option, of seizing power by elections, but combining that with social mobilizations, and breaking with the notion of a dual power as an insurrectionary attack on the state from the outside — the state has to be seized from the inside and from the outside, from above and from below."

The party has a wide variety of Marxist groups including Trotskyites, and, he says, 1,000 to 1,500 Maoists.Â What chairman Mao has to offer Greece is, alas, a mystery to me.Â Mr. Kouvelakis is part of the Left Platform, the main hard left group in the party.Â He says that Tsipras, his deputy P.M. Dragasakis, and others, are actually part of the SYRIZA right wing.Â This is very typical of the Left, always in a froth over the purity of their vision.Â

Â

"Democracy is not supposed to be boring. It is not supposed to be so predictable that elections can be called before campaigns have begun. It is not supposed to sustain an unfair and unequal status quo. It is not supposed to dull the appetite for real reform. It is not supposed to be so frustrating and dysfunctional that the great mass of potential voters is turned by the political process itself into the great mass of non-voters."

John Nichols, The Nation

Â

Indeed.Â I was surprised at the turnout in Greece, 64% of the eligible voters bothered.Â I had, though why I can't say, assumed that figure would be north of 75%, but that was not to be.Â I believe some of this can be attributed to the fact that many voters who were used to casting their votes for one of the main two parties couldn't, due to them both being utterly discredited.Â Yet, to vote for the radical left was a bridge too far.Â Let's not forget, we can safely assume that the majority of SYRIZA voters are not Marxists, but were willing to give them a try given the severity of the current economic and humanitarian conditions and the paucity of energy and ideas from the usual suspects. Â "All we're asking for," feisty Finance MinisterÂ Yanis Varoufakis has said, "is an opportunity to put together a proposal that will minimize the costs of Greece's loan agreement and give this country a chance to breathe again after policies that created massive social depravity." Â Is that too much to ask?

Â

*

Â

When romantic projection falters and fails, when really, to consider relationship deep within the context of all the life lived, to keep as much of that in the air, the skin, on the tongue of consciousness, is that what maturity is?

Â

*

I go to the doctor bearing single malt, and flowers for his receptionist.Â Not my usual M.O. but on my previous visit I had, finally, expressed my displeasure at the enormous amounts of wasted time involved in getting any medical attention in this poor benighted land.Â Oops.Â Within an hour I was saying to myself, Bad move, they're doing the best they can.Â Â And really, in the States I could pay ten times as much and still, more than likely, spend hours sitting around waiting.Â So,

in my mea culpa Markos persona, I returned to the doctor as a good Greek, bearing gifts.Â Still had to wait around but what the hell.Â Doc agrees that some physical therapy for the tendinitis in my shoulder might help and writes up this up in my health insurance book and says, now you have to take this to a gynecologist at the hospital for approval but he's tricky. Â I laugh.Â He says, Now he may try and reduce the number of sessions I've prescribed, it's happened before.Â I have no control over him.Â I exit to the receptionist who will enter my needs into the system and produce an official document.Â But the National Healthcare System's computers have slowed to a crawl and this takes more than a half an hour.Â As I'm getting the papers the doc rushes in and says, waving two printed sheets of paper at me, "If he says I don't have the authority to prescribe physical therapy you show him this and tell him it's the law.Â I do have the authority!Â Oh boy, I can't wait to argue the law with some doctor who obviously outranks mine.Â Maybe SYRIZA can root out some of the corruption which is rife in Greek Healthcare, but only a true believer thinks they'll make it more efficient.Â Â Â Â Â

Â

Post election I zip into Nikos' fish shop.Â He's got a nice salmon on the counter and cuts me three filets.Â Then, â€˜cause we're at the end of fish and the day or perhaps an era, he chops up the rest and says, "This is a gift.Â It's a new beginning."Â "Wow!" says I, donning my shades, "that future sure is bright."

Â

5 February 2015