Greece 2011

The "Hot Spring" Showed That Greeks Were Willing to Fight

- Features -

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Ten years ago, Greece was gripped by square occupations expressing mass opposition to EU austerity policies. The movement’s strength was its ability to rally Greeks from outside the organized left yet it was ultimately defeated by its lack of a clear political alternative.

The Greek “hot spring” of 2011 was a climactic moment of the wave of popular insurgency that spread across much of the world that year. This wave had begun on the southern shore of the Mediterranean with the Tunisian revolution and the Tahrir Square uprising; it then spread to Spain with the Indignados, and then migrated via Greece to the United States with Occupy, before returning to the Mediterranean with the occupation of Istanbul's Gezi Park.

Part of this international revolt, the square occupations involving hundreds of thousands of Greeks can also be situated within the domestic cycle of mobilizations that already shook the country in May 2010, when parliament passed the first memorandum of understanding with Athens's European creditors. This wave of unrest would continue, in various forms, until summer 2015, even after the square occupations ended.

While there were many differences between the uprisings, the Greek movement also shared many characteristics with its counterparts abroad, especially in the Mediterranean. They each had an impressive mass character; a trans-class social composition, with young graduates bearing special weight; majority popular support; and a broad repertoire of actions, centrally the occupation of public space.

No less remarkable were these movements' subjective similarities. Breaking out of established organizational frameworks and political cleavages, they strongly emphasized self-organization and combined socioeconomic demands with the quest for forms of direct or participatory democracy. Given the ubiquitous presence of national flags and their distance from the Left's symbolic and historical references, they exhibited a strong "national" character. But they also reinvented a form of internationalism, as they pointed to shared practices of solidarity and a transnational circulation of symbols, slogans, and modes of action.

Understanding the Greek experience thus allows us to draw some more general conclusions about the paradox of these movements namely, the divergence between their mass insurrectionary dimension and their limited political impact. For, put simply, these movements were unable to deliver lasting advances akin to the goals they set out.

**Organic Crisis**

One useful starting point in understanding the deeper reasons for this development is the concept of "organic crisis," elaborated by Antonio Gramsci in his Prison Notebooks.

Organic crisis refers to a sudden and radical rupture of the relations between social classes and the political forces that hitherto took on the function of representation. This is a specific form of political crisis proper to a parliamentary regime in which an enlarged and pluralist institutional system organizes the terms of the subaltern classes' consent to bourgeois domination.

The stability of this hegemonic system falls apart (hence the “organic” character of the crisis) under the joint pressure of two factors. The first is the failure of the ruling class in some endeavor of strategic importance, such as a war or an
affair of national significance. The second is the sudden passage of large masses of people from a passive state to an active attitude. This change Gramsci emphasizes leads to an explosion of demands coming from the mobilized masses, but in the given circumstances these demands constitute an “inorganic” incoherent whole.

For Gramsci, they nevertheless constitute a revolution, a movement that demands a radical rupture to end a crisis that now becomes a crisis of hegemony, indeed a crisis of the entire state. The organic crisis does not alone amount to a revolutionary crisis, but it contains some of its elements. The ultimate outcome depends above all on the “subjective” intervention by the political forces struggling to seize the leadership of the process and channel it in a determinate direction.

This analysis offers us a key to understanding the specific features of the Greek crisis in spring 2011 and subsequent months. The shock therapy imposed by the memoranda clearly corresponded to a strategic defeat of the Greek bourgeoisie: it undid the foundations of the social contract forged after the fall of the military regime in 1974, transformed the vision of Greece’s “European integration” into a nightmare, and imposed a lasting regime of tutelage and a severe loss of national sovereignty. To keep its grip on the country, the ruling class had to accept a subaltern position and a dramatic deterioration of its international standing.

The combination of these three dimensions (social, ideological, and national) led to the delegitimization not only of the ruling political strata but also of the hegemonic system as a whole. Hence the collapse in the credibility of the media, of establishment “organic” intellectuals, and of representative institutions as such including the forces operating as a loyal opposition inside them. All of this radically put into question both the established elites’ ability to lead the country and the hitherto entrenched two-party system’s capacity to deliver viable solutions.

The national dimension of the crisis is worth emphasizing. The tutelage imposed by the troika (the European Union, the European Central Bank, and the IMF) deprived the Greek ruling class and its personnel of their national function. This loss was accompanied by an attack on the working class, unprecedented by postwar Western European standards but quite similar to the structural adjustment programs promoted by the IMF and the World Bank in many Global South and Eastern European countries since the 1980s.

The combination of the loss of national sovereignty and the violence of the antisocial offensive explains the depth and generalized character of the Greek crisis as compared to the Spanish or Portuguese situation of the same years. It also explains why waving the Greek flag was the most widespread gesture in the occupied squares puzzling those left-wing activists who refused to understand its meaning.

Not seen since the days of the military dictatorship (1967-74) and its immediate aftermath, this mass reappropriation of the flag emerged as a reaction to the imposition of troika rule statement by the people standing up as the “true” Greece, thus separating themselves from those acting in their name. This hegemonic collapse was also the root of a historic opportunity for the radical left. For the first time in decades, the Left suddenly found itself in a position to fight for hegemony an opportunity which rarely occurs in a mature parliamentary regime.

Toward a Revolutionary Crisis?

The square occupations also signaled the second aspect of the organic crisis: the moment when broader masses, well beyond the militants that had hitherto dominated anti-troika mobilizations, took center stage. This joining of forces was hardly automatic. The mutual distrust of the first weeks fueled by the discredited leadership of the trade-union confederation was gradually superseded thanks to the more combative unions and the intervention of the radical left in the popular assemblies held in occupied spaces. Without mixing in an organic way, the “people of
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The peak of the popular mobilization was reached in the three days of general strike on June 15, 28, and 29, with participation reaching levels not seen since the 1970s. In that respect, the Greek movement followed a different path from the Spanish *Indignados*, which lacked any significant interaction with the trade-union movement, and looks rather closer to the Egyptian and Tunisian cases.

This also highlights the exceptional magnitude of the Greek movement. It was certainly greater as a proportion of the population than the Spanish Indignados, and easily bears comparison with the Arab uprisings. According to serious surveys, at the beginning of June 2011, about 2.8 million people 30 percent of the adult population! "certainly" intended to take part in the protests, to which must be added a large share of the 21 percent who declared a "strong probability" of joining.

Meanwhile, 35 percent declared that they had already participated in rallies and other popular initiatives organized in the previous period. With the movement reaching its peak during the rallies held during the June 28-29 general strike, a realistic estimate is that at least one-third of the population actively participated in these mobilizations. Moreover, in surveys throughout this period, at least two-thirds of Greeks rejected the memoranda and the troika regime.

This majority dynamic also explains the mobilization's duration and intensity. Despite the ebb of the squares movement following the June 29 vote on the "intermediate" memorandum, mobilization reached a new peak a few months later. Over October 19-20, Greece was paralyzed by the most massive general strike since the fall of the dictatorship. A week later, on October 28  the national day celebrating the "no" to Mussolini in 1940  people took to the streets in dozens of cities and put an end to the military parades, forcing state representatives (including the president) to quit the podium.

At the same time, Prime Minister George Papandreou, humiliated at the European summit in Cannes when he proposed a referendum on the memoranda, resigned in favor of a "grand coalition" government steered by the EU and led by the banker Loukas Papademos. With his support quickly eroding both inside and outside parliament, Papademos called a snap election in May 2012, then another in June after the first failed to deliver a majority. This double election saw the collapse of the two-party system, whose pillars the social-democratic PASOK and the right-wing New Democracy fell from a total of 77.4 percent of the vote in November 2009 to just 42 percent.

It thus seems no exaggeration to say that the Greek crisis displayed elements of a revolutionary situation in line with Lenin's famous definition also one of the main sources of the Gramscian notion of organic crisis:

> It is only when the "lower classes" do not want to live in the old way and the "upper classes" cannot carry on in the old way that the revolution can triumph. This truth can be expressed in other words: revolution is impossible without a nation-wide crisis (affecting both the exploited and the exploiters).

But the missing  and most decisive  condition was another, less-noted one which Lenin mentions in this same passage:

> that a majority of the workers (or at least a majority of the class-conscious, thinking, and politically active workers) should fully realize that revolution is necessary, and that they should be prepared to die for it.
In other words, there can be no revolution without mass support for revolutionary solutions; and this support is no automatic result of a mass movement. A certain type of political preparation and intervention is needed. This type of collective awareness was absent from an uprising whose horizon was shaped by the visceral rejection of the Troika and the ruling politicians not by the will to overthrow the existing social order. But the fact remains that, for the first time since the great upheavals of the 1960s and '70s, the possibility of a break in the social and political balance of forces was emerging in the European country that was again becoming the weak link within the continental center of capitalism.

The Movement's Greatness and Its Limits

The 2011 squares movement followed in a long series of insurrectionary events punctuating modern Greek history. But if this explains its greatness, the sudden and explosive character of the uprising also made it highly contradictory. The "people of the squares" mostly lacked previous experience of organization or even participation in collective action, and thus put forward what Gramsci would have termed a set of noncoherent demands and practices.

Whoever experienced Syntagma Square at the time remembers this mixture of anger and combativeness, of football-stadium atmosphere and genuine radicalism, of indiscriminate rejection of politics combined with a search for self-organization and direct participation in public affairs. This hodgepodge of attitudes and practices was accompanied by a fascination with magical solutions to the crisis from calls for a return to ancient Athenian democracy to various conspiracy theories about the causes of the public debt.

The most important contradiction was perhaps the one encapsulated by the most widespread watchword of the squares movement the demand for νμΑ· θÁ±á±, usually translated as "direct democracy." The Greek term νμΑ· is, however, best translated as "immediate" it means both without mediations, therefore direct, and something to be realized immediately. In this sense, one of the main limits of the movement of the squares resides in the fact that it did not give real content to this demand for immediate democracy.

For many, it meant an anti-parliamentarianism of a spontaneous or rather, brutal sort, illustrated by impressive crowds in Syntagma Square chanting "Let's burn this brothel of a parliament." For others, it meant a libertarian idea of democracy without mediations a purely horizontal model inspired by the forms of self-organization emerging in the occupied squares.

For others still, it meant a drastic yet vaguely defined institutional reform establishing a "real" democracy, or, at least, the democratic functioning that was suppressed by the troika regime and the escalating authoritarianism that followed. Besides, the initial call to occupy the squares its title eventually taken up by the page and the Facebook group that launched the movement in Syntagma Square was entitled "Real Democracy Now!" in direct reference to Madrid's Puerta del Sol.

The squares movement did not succeed in synthesizing these ideas as the basis of an alternative political project, just as it did not succeed in producing an alternative economic reorganization going beyond a rejection of austerity and Troika tutelage. It thus shares the "negative" character of the uprisings of the last decade, which Alain Badiou defined as the fact that their main, if not exclusive, unifying factor is the generalized rejection of those who rule.

It now seems evident that the absence of an alternative project, far from freeing politics from the weight of ideologies and grand narratives as many postmodern thinkers would have us believe leads to impotence and, usually, to a reactionary restoration, of which el-Sisi's ruthless dictatorship in Egypt is the most terrible example.
Yet the movement's main limit was at another level—one from which, in the last instance, the rest followed suit. This was not just about its inability to formulate a global alternative, or even its failure to stop parliament voting through the memorandum. In fact, from the outset such objectives seemed beyond the reach of an eruptive, heterogeneous movement, whose lifespan was to be counted in weeks. The decisive shortcoming was that it did not leave behind an organizational framework or even the project for one capable of bringing the popular struggle to a higher level.

Yet, it did provide valuable and sometimes lasting elements for such an undertaking. It substantially renewed the repertoire of collective action and stimulated many local initiatives for solidarity, self-organization, and direct action. But it did not elaborate a form that could autonomously organize and coordinate the popular struggle in the period that followed a limitation shared by similar movements breaking out around the world both then and since.

So the movement was unable to cross a certain threshold in its own capacities to develop broader alternative visions and to interact productively with political actors. This was the main reason for the discrepancy between the movement's impressive mobilizing capacity and its inability to achieve tangible and positive results.

The Capitulation

At first sight, Greece appears as an exception to the strictly negative principle of unification defined, and criticized, by Badiou. The cycle of popular mobilization of 2010-2012 did lead to a real shift in the political scene with Syriza the main beneficiary. It appeared as the only force willing to satisfy the demand for a political rupture emerging from mobilizations which could not deliver this on their own. In the given context and keeping in mind the symbolic weight of the radical left in a country that experienced a civil war and decades of anti-communist persecution, Syriza's proposal for an "anti-austerity government of the left" appeared as a decision to break the existing framework.

Despite its negative or defensive objective (ending austerity and Troika tutelage), it was perceived as an attempt to overcome the oppositional, but subordinate, traditional role assigned to the Left by the two-party system and to confront the question of power in real terms. In this respect, if only this, Syriza emerged as the actor that understood the opportunity that the organic crisis offered. This is a key lesson of the whole period: sustained popular mobilization does create the conditions for a shift to the Left, but for these conditions to materialize, a potentially hegemonic political proposal is needed.

This also raises the problem of the responsibilities and, ultimately, the failure of the actor that played this role. For want of a systematic analysis, here we can simply say that Syriza's position amounted to a narrow electoral management of the dynamics created by the mobilization from below keeping it just to what was needed for success at the polls. Never did it propose any plan to organize the popular struggle, a midterm vision, or even the preparation of the most immediate conditions for a victorious outcome of the coming battle. And among these conditions, one was of decisive strategic importance: the confrontation with the EU and the mechanisms it would predictably use against any government that dared to challenge its policies starting with the European Central Bank's nuclear weapon, the euro.

Syriza's capitulation does not mean that nothing ever happened—that a wager of historical significance was not played out, and lost, during those first seven months of 2015. But it does mean that the moment of truth was not so much Syriza's electoral success in January 2015 as the fact that this electoral success intensified the cycle of conflict that began in 2010 indeed, against the will of the figures it brought into government. The moment of truth came in July 2015 with the referendum on the EU austerity package. The hot spring of 2011 was resuscitated, however briefly, not in Syriza's electoral win itself but in the July 3, 2015, rally in Syntagma Square and the 61.3 percent for "no" in the July 5 referendum.

This resounding "no" caused worldwide amazement but it was reversed only a few days later, and became a "yes" to EU austerity in the hands of those who saw this vote only as an unsustainable burden. As Alexis Tsipras signed a
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third memorandum, Greece turned overnight from a beacon of hope into a trauma from which the Greek and international left is yet to recover.

It is thus crucial that the lessons of this tough experience not be lost. The first is that even a mass movement of such magnitude cannot alone provide solutions to the problems posed by its own emergence. Politics remains the necessary and ultimately decisive factor, shaping the outcome of any given situation. But it is also clear that we should not indulge any political proposal that presents itself as of the Left yet stubbornly refuses to work out how it will secure a victorious outcome.

Source: Jacobin.

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