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Greece

From the absurd to the tragic

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Anyone living through, or even just following, developments in Greece knows all too well the meaning of expressions such as “critical moments,” “climate of tension,” “dramatic overturn,” and “pressing on the limits.” With developments since Monday, some new vocabulary will have to be added to the list: the “absurd.”

The word may seem strange, or an overstatement. But how else could one characterize the total reversal of the meaning of an event as amazing as the July 5 referendum, only hours after its conclusion, by those that called for a “no” vote to begin with?

How could one explain that New Democracy’s Vangelis Meimarakis and To Potami leader Stavros Theodorakis — heads of the camp so crushingly defeated on Sunday — should have become the official spokespersons for the line being followed by the Greek government? How is it possible for a devastating “no” to memorandum austerity policies to be interpreted as a green light for a new memorandum? And to put it in commonsense terms: if they were disposed to sign something even worse and even more binding than European Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker’s proposals, what was the point of the referendum and the struggle to achieve victory in it?

The sense of the absurd is not just a product of this unexpected reversal. It stems above all from the fact that all of this is unfolding before our eyes as if nothing has happened, as if the referendum were something like a collective hallucination that suddenly ends, leaving us to continue freely what we were doing before. But because we have not all become lotus-eaters, let us at least give a brief résumé of what has taken place over the past few days.

Last Sunday, the Greek people staggered Europe and the world, responding en masse to the government’s call and, in conditions unprecedented by the postwar standards of any European country, overwhelmingly voted “no” to the extortionate and humiliating proposals of the lenders. Both the extent of the “no” vote and its qualitative composition, with its enormous lead among workers and youth, testify to the depth of the transformations that have been occurring, or rather that have crystallized in such a short time, in Greek society.

Friday’s mass mobilizations, the climate “from below” that has prevailed over the last week, not to mention the enthusiastic wave of international solidarity, testify to the huge potential that is opened by the choice of popular political conflict rather than retreat.

But from Monday morning, before the victory cries in the country’s public squares had even fully died away, the theater of the absurd began. Under the aegis of the actively pro-Yes Greek president of the republic, Prokopis Pavlopoulos, the government summoned the heads of the defeated parties to elaborate a framework for negotiation positing the euro as an unpassable outer limit of the Greek position and declaring specifically that it has no mandate to leave the monetary union.

The public, still in the joyful haze of Sunday, watches as the representative of the 62 percent subordinated to the 38 percent in the immediate aftermath of a resounding victory for democracy and popular sovereignty.

On Tuesday, the government, with no new “proposal” to make, transfers its operations to Brussels for the extraordinary Eurogroup meeting and, as is absolutely logical, finds itself confronted with a new and even harsher ultimatum. The next day Euclid Tsakalotos inaugurates his duties as finance minister (in the interests of brevity we pass over the factor of Yanis Varoufakis’ resignation, simply noting that it was a demand of the lenders) by sending to

the European Stability Mechanism (ESM), the organization that manages the greater part of the Greek debt, a letter requesting a new loan of €50 billion, which will be accompanied of course by a third memorandum. It is envisaged, indeed, that the parliament will begin on Monday to vote on the relevant enabling legislation.

The Tsakalotos letter continues with references to Greece undertaking “to honor its financial obligations to all of its creditors in a full and timely manner.” It is obvious that despite the assurances that were heard after the proclamation of the referendum for “restarting discussions from scratch” the “negotiations” are continuing exactly from where they left off, with the Greeks lowering the bar for their opponents every step of the way.

The same day, pending the new Greek “proposals,” which were to be “reliable” and detailed,” Prime Minister Alexis Tsipras addresses the European Parliament and declares that “if my aim had been to take Greece out of the euro, I would not immediately after the closing of the polls have gone to make the statements I made and interpret the result of the referendum not as a mandate for a break with Europe but as a mandate for reinforcing our negotiating efforts so as to arrive at a better agreement.”

This amounts to more or less open acknowledgement that the result of the referendum was being interpreted with a specific end in mind, that of negotiation at all costs and avoidance of a rift.

In the same speech, the prime minister outlines quite succinctly the philosophy that for many weeks has been informing the whole stance of the Greek side and to which the parenthesis of the referendum has not brought the slightest change:

In these proposals we have evidently undertaken a powerful commitment to achieve the fiscal goals that are required on the basis of the rules, because we recognize, and respect, the fact that the eurozone has rules. But we reserve the right of choice, the right of being able, as a sovereign government, to choose where we shall place, and add to, the burden of taxation, so as to be in a position to attain the required fiscal objectives.

So the framework is given: it is that of the restrictive measures which secure fiscal surpluses and aim at the repayment of debt. It is incontestably the framework of the memoranda. The disagreement is over the “distribution of the burden.” It involves a (supposedly) “socially more just” variant of austerity, which will be presented as “redistribution” at the same time as it perpetuates the recession (every reference to commitment to non-recessionary measures has been effaced) and impoverishment of the majority.

In the meantime, and while these soothing reassurances are being put forward that demolish what has remained of Syriza’s programmatic commitments, there is a ramping up of the state of siege that the country is enduring, with the European Central Bank holding closed the spigot of liquidity and trimming even further the value of bank bonds, leading unavoidably to collapse.

And yet, despite the gravity of the situation and despite the fact that through the imposition of capital controls part of the road has already been covered, nobody, apart from Costas Lapavistas and some cadres of the Left Platform, is speaking of the self-evident and basic measures of self-protection that are necessitated by circumstances of this kind, starting from public control and nationalization of the banking system.

The explanation for this is of course very simple: anything of this kind would place Greece with one foot outside the euro, which the government is completely unwilling to do, despite the fact that even mainstream economists like Paul Krugman assert that “the greater part of the cost has already been paid” and that it is time for Greece “to reap the benefits.”

A simple conclusion emerges from all this: with the moves it has made in the last week, the government has achieved nothing other than a full return to previous entrapment, from a much more unfavorable position, under the pressure of even more relentless economic asphyxiation. It has managed to squander the powerful injection of political capital from the referendum in record time, following at all points the line of those who had opposed it and who have every reason to feel vindicated, despite being trounced at the ballot box.

But the referendum happened. It wasn't a hallucination from which everyone has now recovered. On the contrary, the hallucination is the attempt to downgrade it to a temporary "letting off of steam," prior to resuming the downhill course towards a third memorandum.

And it seems that the government is precisely going down that suicidal road. Yesterday, late in the evening, it sent to all members of parliament (MPs) a hastily written, twelve-page text, written in English by experts sent by the French government and based on Tsakalotos' request for a €50 billion loan to the ESM.

This is nothing but a new austerity package — actually, a "copy and paste" of the Juncker plan rejected by the electorate a few days ago. Its core is all too familiar: primary surpluses, cuts in pensions, increase in the VAT and other taxes, and a handful of measures to give it a slight flavor of "social justice" (e.g., an increase in the corporate tax rate by two points). The document was approved by all the major ministers except Panos Kammenos, head of the Independent Greeks party (ANEL), and Panagiotis Lafazanis, the leader of the Left Platform.

The parliament has been called to vote on this text today, under the same emergency procedures that were previously forcefully denounced by Syriza. In many aspects this process can be considered a "parliamentary coup" since the parliament is asked to vote on a text that is neither a bill, nor an international agreement, giving a kind of carte blanche to the government to sign off any loan agreement. But this parliamentary approval has been explicitly set as a condition for any further negotiation by the German finance minister, Wolfgang Schäuble.

As was predictable, and probably even planned, this proposed agreement has triggered an uproar inside Syriza. For the moment, most of the strong reactions are come from the Left Platform and other currents of Syriza's left wing such as KOE, the Maoist organization that has four MPs. In today's dramatic meeting of Syriza's parliamentary group, Lafazanis, minister of energy and leader of the Left Platform, said the agreement is "incompatible with Syriza's program" and "doesn't offer a positive perspective to the country." The Left Platform ministers are expected to resign today.

Thanassis Petrakos, one of the three speakers of Syriza's parliamentary group and a prominent member of the Left Platform, declared:

The "no" of the referendum was a radical and a class "no." Some high-ranked comrades insist on the "there is no other way" logic. We should prepare exiting the eurozone and say that clearly to the people. The Left has a future when it opens its wings to the unknown, not to nothingness. Those who insist on the choice of staying in the euro whatever the cost might know that it is a disaster. We need a prepared exit to open up a new path. The first steps are the public control of the banks and of the Greek central bank and a crackdown on oligarchy.

Varoufakis is also said to have opposed the agreement, as well as some MPs from the group of the "fifty-three" (the left wing of the majority), although in an internal meeting held yesterday a significant gap appeared between the rank-and-file and middle-range cadres, strongly opposed to the agreement, and the MPs, much more inclined to support it. The vote that will take place late in the evening will certainly be of crucial importance for the future developments, but also for the future of Syriza.

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Whatever happens in the next few hours and days, one thing should be clear: any attempt to cancel the popular will for the overturn of austerity and the memoranda amounts to hubris in the ancient Greek sense of the term. Whoever dares to lead the country, and the Left, to surrender and to dishonor should be ready to face the corresponding Nemesis.

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Translated by Wayne Hall.

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