

July 1, 2015

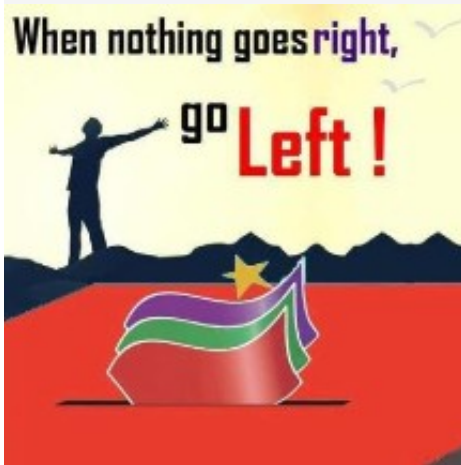
Syriza's Final Charade

By Jim Kavanagh

Syriza has capitulated. The referendum is just another element of that. This is a result that augurs ill for Greece, for Europe, and for any socialist left there might be.

.....

[Go to source](#)



In my February post on [The SYRIZA Moment](#) (and in a revision of that piece, forthcoming in [Canadian Dimension](#)), I expressed great skepticism about the Syriza leadership's commitment to the radical change the party promised to enact.

I pointed out that the leadership, as represented by Alex Tsipras and Yanis Varoufakis, refuses on principle to have a strategy for "replacing European capitalism with a different, more rational, system." In Varoufakis's own words, they are "tirelessly striv[ing] in favour of schemas the purpose of which is to save" the current "indefensible "anti-democratic, irreversibly neoliberal, highly irrational," European socio-economic system. All this, because, as he understands it, "it is the Left's historical duty"to save European capitalism from itself." Varoufakis's whole negotiating strategy, I suggested, was centered on persuading the masters and mistresses of the Eurozone, through his brilliant "immanent critique" of their own capitalist economic theories, that it would be in their own, and capitalism's, best interest to help Greece restore some semblance of social democracy.

Certainly, the left factions of the party sincerely wanted it to be an "anticapitalist," "class-struggle" formation that would be unlike "any European social democratic party today," and that would have "an agenda of really breaking with neoliberalism and austerity," and the capitalist TINA (There Is No Alternative) consensus. These currents defined Syriza's 40-Point Program and its Thessaloniki Program, upon which it ran for election, and which promised a "National Reconstruction Plan that will replace the [Troika] Memorandum as early as our first days in power, **before and regardless of the negotiation outcome.**"

But even the hopeful left militants recognized that the party leadership, under Tsipras, was increasingly prone to ignore the base, and cultivated a "creative ambiguity" about crucial

issues. Tsipras's message to the base was a rejection of illegitimate and unpayable debt, and a radical break with austerity; his message to the Eurozone ruling class was a firm commitment to staying in the Euro and playing by the rules of capitalist finance. The message to the electorate was: *We can do both of those things. And if we can't" Well, yes we can!*

This was a deeply dishonest deception and self-deception. It was the worst kind of electoral evasion, promoting false hopes that so many wanted to hear, and burying the need to prepare for the inevitable fight that was coming--thus virtually guaranteeing that the fight would be lost.

There was no way Syriza was going to get what it claimed it wanted in the negotiations with the Troika. The neo-liberal elite that had destroyed social democracy was not interested in bringing it back, not even a bit. And the Eurozone Masters were not interested in hearing a rational critique but in asserting power--*class power*, as [Jack Rasmus](#) has aptly pointed out--and enforcing compliance.

And, in fact, by the end of February, Syriza had already reneged on its pledge to start implementing the National Plan "regardless of the negotiations on the debt," when it agreed to subject any implementation of that plan to the prior approval of the lenders.

At this point, Tsipras and Varoufakis, after capitulating on almost every red line of the Syriza program, have been thoroughly slapped down at the negotiating table. Now, after five post-election months of nothing but assurances that a deal to preserve the dignity of Greece was inevitable, they turn to face a populace completely unprepared for the kind of struggle that would be necessary to exit the Eurozone and build a new kind of social economy.

As of today, July 1st, with Greece having missed an IMF payment, it's becoming clear to everyone what a foolish fantasy and devastating betrayal the Syriza strategy has been, including the upcoming referendum on Saturday which is nothing more than a cruel hoax.

A lot of well-meaning leftists, who have been dragged along on this Hellenic hope-a-dope by their own wishful thinking and refusal to hear what Tsipras and Varoufakis have been saying, want to see this referendum as the finally-really-radical moment when Syriza stands up with the people and rejects austerity.

Sorry, but more wishful thinking. From the perspective of achieving a radical break from the austerity agenda, this referendum is a farce.

Really, what could it possibly achieve? What is it even a referendum on? Tsipras is calling for a vote on a complicated deal that, after the missed IMF payment, is *no longer even on the table*. So a Yes vote is a vote for nothing. And a No vote, far from effecting some kind of powerful rejection of debt and austerity, is just going to be used, as Tsipras tells us, to go back to the negotiating table and beg the bankers to accept the capitulation on nine-tenths of the Syriza program he has already made, rather than the twelve-tenths they're insisting on. Any result of this referendum, in other words, is going to be used, by Syriza or some other party, as an excuse for accepting compliance with the neo-liberal austerity agenda.

Indeed, Tsipras, in a pathetic, groveling letter to his European masters today, says that Greece is "prepared to accept," "with small modifications" the very deal the referendum is supposed to reject. In his address to the Greek people, he says that voting No on the referendum is not a vote to leave the euro, but only a tactic to improve his negotiating position.

Similarly, Varoufakis today says "Greece will stay in the euro." He renounces "any Greek

thoughts of Grexit," and intones that "Greece's place in the Eurozone and in the European Union is non-negotiable" The future demands a proud Greece within the Eurozone and at the heart of Europe. This future demands that Greeks say a big NO on Sunday, that we stay in the Euro Area, and that, with the power vested upon us by that NO, we renegotiate Greece's public debt."

Besides the infinite capacity for blatantly contradictory doubletalk (*Say no so we can say yes!*), there seems to be a stubborn delusion here about what this referendum can achieve. Why do you need this referendum? Didn't Syriza win an election decisively, on the basis of a specific radical left program? Wasn't that a referendum? Didn't you claim then, and bring that claim to the Eurocrats, and assure the people, that *that* electoral result vested you with the power to drastically reduce the debt?

And now you're calling another election--a referendum on some complicated and *moot* negotiating tactic, on whether to accept surrendering nine-tenths or twelve-tenths of the program that was voted on in the last election/referendu? Because, what? A big NO here will really, really this time vest you with the power to "renegotiate"? Trumpeting *this* election result will force the Eurocrats to change their tune--as the last result was supposed to, but didn't? When the only "power" you have, the only "or else," is precisely the Grexit you have renounced in advance? What's left to "renegotiate" when you have already negotiated yourself into a *worse* position of austerity than the predecessor government you so vehemently attacked? As [Michael Roberts](#) points out:

[T]he Greek government has gone from an original demand for the cancellation of the 'odious' debt to 'debt relief' and then to dropping the reversal of privatisations and the introduction of collective bargaining to the last 'red lines' on no pension cuts or VAT increases on the poor. And those final red lines have been breached by the IMF and the Eurogroup. The deal as it stands would **mean fiscal austerity of up to 9bn euros HIGHER than Samaras agreed to last December!**

In a mark of how pathetic Syriza's position has become, Merkel & Co., are appropriating the strong political stance Syriza should be taking. By insisting, "This referendum means in or out of the euro," they are pre-empting Syriza's bluff, and signaling their contempt of Syriza's weakness: *Go ahead, have another of your "democratic" exercises. We know you don't have the stomach to make it mean anything. Here's how you'd do it if you did. We know, and you know, and you know that we know, that you'll come running back to us,*

Of course Greeks should vote *No!* in Saturday's referendum. But that will mean nothing unless the referendum becomes for them exactly what Tsipras and Varoufakis do not want it to be, and Merkel & Co fake-insist that it is: a referendum on whether to leave the Euro or not. It will mean nothing unless left forces are able to replace the Tsipras faction with a leadership that is capable of leading a fight for a radically different social economy, rather than walking themselves back to the negotiating table to plead with financial tyrants who have already told them to f*ck off.

Of course, there's very little chance of that, since the political work needed to create the conditions for it has not been done over the past five months, since Syriza has been committed to a feigned fight, at to expense of the real one. Given that lack of political groundwork, and given the interests and ideologies of all the major players, it's virtually

inevitable that Syriza (if it's a No vote) or some other party (if it's a Yes vote) will return to the negotiations to prostrate themselves to the Euromeisters and return to the Greek people with a ~~capitulation~~ compromise that celebrates the unity and irreversibility of the Eurozone, and Greece's ~~demise~~ recovery on a capitalist basis. Because, for all of them, There Is No Alternative.

No way to avoid it: This would be a capitulation and a failure of the most promising left-populist movement that has appeared on the horizon in decades. And, as Stathis Kouvelakis, of Syriza's Left Faction, remarked in January: "If Syriza fails then the prospects for the country will be very reactionary and authoritarian," since "people are aware, over a much broader spectrum of forces now, that this is the only real possibility, and that, if we are defeated, then this will be a defeat for a whole forthcoming historical period." And not just for Greece. Syriza's acceptance of a neo-liberal austerity program will signal to people throughout Europe that the purportedly new populist left still believes There Is No Alternative to the bankster plutocracy that is ravaging their lives and destroying their societies. This will demoralize whatever real left remains, and leave the field open for a tide of right-wing, neo-fascist populism that *is* waiting to sweep across Europe.

Have you noticed that, when the right wins an election, no matter how closely, with a blatantly capitalist and anti-popular program, it says: "We were elected on that program, and now we're going to institute it"? And, indeed, they go about making it so, decisively--mobilizing their cadres and continually explaining to the populace the logic and ethic of their radical anti-populist program. Without calling for a second, discretionary election, just to make sure it's okay with everyone.

But, when the left wins an election with a popular, radical, or semi-socialist program that would benefit the vast majority, it says: "We have to mollify and reassure our capitalist 'partners,' and everyone who has doubts, before we do anything really significant. Maybe we should have another optional election just to make sure that it's really okay for us to do what we were elected to do."

As a friend of mine once wrote, it's like a boxing match in which one party is fighting to win and the other is trying to fight and be the referee at the same time.

There is a class war going on, and its front line today is in Greece, where, in an all-too-familiar pattern, the political representatives of one class are fighting it to win, while those of the other are refereeing their own defeat, negotiating with such intellectual guile that they persuade themselves capitulation is compromise.

I hesitate to make the comparison, because the world-historical stakes are incommensurable, but, as an American, I can't help but notice that Tsipras & Co are doing to the anti-austerity movement in Europe what Obama did to public healthcare in the United States: Raising hopes and expectations that a more progressive way is possible, while actually negotiating the stabilization and continuity of the old order for "a whole historical period," and leading the left into a cul-de-sac that will be even harder to get out of.

Syriza has capitulated. The referendum is just another element of that. This is a result that augurs ill for Greece, for Europe, and for any socialist left there might be. This is a horrible and depressing conclusion, but I've got nothing else to give you, on this strange and mournful day.

Submitters Website: <http://www.thepolemicist.net>

Submitters Bio:

Former college professor, native and denizen of New York City. Blogging at www.thepolemicist.net, aiming to be intellectually rigorous, politically challenging, and occasionally snarky, from a left-socialist perspective.