

The Greek crisis illustrates both the poverty of Syriza's ideology and the flaws in the EU's balance-sheet approach to decision-making

 blogs.lse.ac.uk/europpblog/2015/07/02/the-greek-crisis-illustrates-both-the-poverty-of-syrizas-ideology-and-the-flaws-in-the-eus-ba

7/2/2015

Who carries the blame for the Greek debt crisis: the country's government or its creditors?

Lambros Fatsis writes that while there is a tendency to blame one side or the other for the crisis, both sides must take joint-responsibility for the failure to negotiate a solution. He argues that the Syriza-led government's stubbornly uncooperative stance has undermined the country's position, while the EU's decision to place a premium on economic concerns at the expense of political questions has been similarly damaging.



Following a harrowing five-month period of fierce and conflicting negotiations between Greece and its fellow-European creditors, what could be a fragile agreement between the two sides that ought to be on the same side, turned into a [Greek bailout referendum](#). And while it is too early to cheer or sneer at the collapse of negotiations in Brussels, this may be a good time to pause and reflect on the time that has passed, as well as to offer an assessment of *where* we are, *whither* we are tending, *what* to do now and *how* to do it, to paraphrase [Abraham Lincoln](#). To do so, we need to look at the combustible relations between Greece and its creditors, and examine what makes these negotiations so flammable and toxic, before the whole thing fades into a faint memory of yet another tale of mystery and suspense in the contemporary political mythology of Europe.

Unlike the binary plot structure of myths however, this is a story with many guilty parties, many collateral casualties, and much cross-dressing too. The villain disguises herself as the helper, the victim plays the role of the hero, and the play moves towards a disappointing epilogue which can only be met with a tepid applause from the audience. And while the script itself is hardly riveting, the overall drama elicits enormous public interest, and invites challenging questions about the very identity of Europe at a time of restless dissatisfaction with things as they are, tinged with a sense of foreboding, and a suspicion that what is currently happening isn't enough to function as a sign for hope that the European dream is alive and well.

As a pro-European, left-liberal citizen of the [1989 generation](#), I have no choice but to play an uncompromising round of the blame game over the recent episodes of the European crisis, since much of what is at stake is very dear to me both as a European citizen of Greek descent, and a social scientist alike. And while this is hardly constructive under normal circumstances, there is little else by way of critical commentary when trying to interpret the current climate in Europe, without resorting to stale optimistic effusions that obscure the clarity of our view, more than they unlock our ability to think analytically.

Without wanting to resort to the rigmarole of simplistic finger-pointing and unhelpful demonisation, it is also impossible to ignore the joint responsibility of [Syriza](#) and its international creditors in turning political deliberation into a dark ritual. The intent here is therefore to deal with assigning liabilities to each side, while pointing out what they can do in common to remove the debris of miscommunication and discord, without consigning the idea of Europe to the dustbin of history.

The poverty of ideology

Since Syriza took office in January 2015, in coalition with the far-rightist [ANEL party](#) and the [Ecologist Greens](#), it has fought tooth and nail to maintain its crumbling "radical left" façade through a deceptively hard-line stance which masks the party's utter despair upon realising the impossibility of tallying its overinflated pre-electoral pledges with

the exigencies of state power.

But instead of humbly acknowledging fault and offering a sincere public apology, Syriza and their allies opted for saving face through a mix of cunning, scheming and unscrupulous tactics. In doing so, Syriza and its dubious political partners misled the electorate, angered fellow EU member states, divided public opinion domestically and internationally, and devalued hard-won ideals of the (Greek) Left.

They did this first by pandering to people's legitimate anger, frustration and despair, through flaunting the coalition government's anti-austerity credentials, misdirecting blame to the previous government and the country's international creditors, and masquerading as a victimised, misled ally of the people by refusing to act as a responsible player in the country's affairs, or a conscious maker of its fate.

Second, Syriza manipulated social discontent opportunistically through fuelling anti-European sentiment, adopting an unashamedly populist attitude, and creating false hopes for a solution that would allegedly refuse to cross the party's red lines, or betray unrealistic pre-electoral promises (the so-called Thessaloniki programme), to avoid disappointing their supporters' cherished dreams and hopes.

Third, they polarised public opinion by planting minefields instead of building bridges, and inventing enemies instead of seeking allies, both at home and abroad. The indicative exceptions being the People's Republic of China, the Republic of Azerbaijan, and the Russian Bear.

Fourth, Syriza sabotaged the negotiations during multiple Eurogroup meetings with what may have been styled as "creative ambiguity", but in reality proved to be a fig leaf for arrogance and mealy-mouthed hypocrisy regardless of the cost or consequences of such actions (e.g. Grexit).

Finally, they usurped the repertoire of Left politics by infecting the public debate with divisive rhetoric that carved Greek society up into bona fide supporters on the one hand and corrupt, unpatriotic fifth-columnists and staunch neo-liberal traitors on the other. They thereby created an atmosphere of tribalism instead of critical political deliberation.

To make matters worse, this attitude has far-reaching effects and damaging consequences politically, socially and culturally for a number of reasons. First of all, it is a politics of smokescreens that wilfully dulls people's critical faculties, heats up bitter social divisions, and ignores the warning that '[the sleep of reason produces monsters](#)', by evoking what is most superstitious, backward, conspiratorial, paranoid and dogmatic in Greek society at large. In doing so, such posturing exploits, usurps and ultimately disrespects the legacy of the country's recent history of longstanding ideological animosities and violence by re-igniting painful memories of the civil war of 1946-1949, and the military junta of 1967-1974, and tuning collective sentiment to the key of hostility and hatred.

One such example is the coalition government's deliberate attempt to mobilise anti-German sentiment by claiming German war reparations for World War II in an offensive manner, through [aggressive threats](#), and by means of a [deplorable propaganda](#) broadcast in the video-screens of the Athens metro. Last but not least, it misrepresents the vocabulary and grammar of Left politics by giving a distorted view of it as a language of opposition, resistance, and inflammatory speech-making alone, thereby ignoring a rich reservoir of Left ideas that treat politics as a medium of and for conviviality.

This view of Left politics carries a number of negative connotations, as it assumes that consensus means surrender, co-operation means co-optation and that "being Left" means treating ideas as frozen and immutable orthodoxies, rather than critically weighing them up with an independent mind and an autonomous attitude. The first route lends itself to a maximalist and populist vision of politics, while the later embraces plurality, diversity and disagreement, prefers reasoned argument to hectoring diatribes, excels in a searching spirit rather than a condescending attitude towards ideological opponents, and strives to understand ideas *in their own terms* rather than *in our own terms*.

This is the kind of Left that many opponents of the junta were imprisoned, tortured and exiled for, who would refuse to accept that a “radical left” and “radical right” coalition government has the temerity to speak in their name. A stubbornly uncooperative stance is no more “Left” than a mutualist attitude, resistance doesn’t only equal *opposition* and face-to-face confrontations; it can also rely on *aposition* and side-by-side agreement. And politics does not mean narrowing the range of possibilities to the most fervently wished for, if unattainable, goals, but also seeking real political progress by carefully examining a dizzying range of alternatives when deciding how to act, without having to either surrender or set the conflagration alight.

The balance sheet of power

Turning to the other tripartite coalition – the European Commission, the ECB and the IMF (aka. the *troika*) – the problem here is not so much ideological, as it is *ideational*. While we could, as [some](#) have, describe the EU as a regime of (neo)liberalised transnational markets, it can more appropriately be blamed here for disinvesting in the post-Second World War project of European integration; for depoliticising the economy by *technocratising* it instead; and for choosing not to govern the markets, but rather *for* the markets.

In doing so, it placed a premium on economic concerns at the expense of political questions, by managerialising what ought to be a primarily political union between member states. Such prioritisation of the economy over other ties between European allies gradually transformed the function on the EU from an institutional body that regulates the “government of states”, to an accounting firm that focuses on the “management of funds”, to paraphrase the notorious [Saint-Simonian](#) slogan.

The consequence of this is that politics comes to be understood in terms of the economy and market systems alone, in a process that creates winners and losers, leaders and followers, successes and failures, and encourages competitiveness rather than equality between member states, by forging an economic model of competition, conflict and emulation, instead of fostering a political contract of thesis, antithesis and synthesis. Such displacement of priorities weakened levels of EU integration, punished poorly regulated European nation states, boosted the [German dominance of the EU](#), and institutionalised managerial responses to a crisis that goes beyond Dow Jones arithmetic.

This inevitably gave rise to stereotypes about “lazy Greeks” that were left virtually unchallenged, resulting in a relationship of enmity and mistrust among strong and weak European partners which poisoned any sense of mutual feeling – and did irreparable damage to the very idea of Europe. Worse still, this two-tier mentality produced economic plans and agreements that were not designed to help stimulate ailing economies, but simply kept them solvent vis-à-vis their international creditors, making a mockery of any idea of a fiscal union within the Eurozone. In the context of the recent negotiations over the Greek bailout, all this became apparent through the troika’s insistence to “rule by spreadsheet”, instead of being guided by political imperatives.

The bankruptcy of a political union

The casualty of such a clash is of course the weakest player, but also the political union of European member states, who instead of being *united equally* as a “people” (the *demos* of democracy), were *divided equally* like the competing beneficiaries of a will. The front cover of the latest edition of [Charlie Hebdo](#) offers a chilling, yet painfully accurate allegory of this state of affairs by depicting Christine Lagarde “drowning a Greek”, as a way of “saving Europe”. While the sub-text of the cartoon may be satirical, it also paints the current mood in and of Europe, where this provocative cover can serve simultaneously as a criticism of European policy, as well as a desirable solution to the Dark Continent’s sorrows.

Another image however may hold promise for the solution of the European problem such as it is. It is a picture of the [Trümmerfrauen](#), or “Women of the Ruins”, who in the aftermath of World War II cleaned and stacked the stones of the war destroyed German cities. What this powerful image suggests is not only that the European demos and its leaders need to pick themselves up, dust themselves off and start all over again, but that the solution is not behind

us, before us or beyond us, it is simply *between* us; hiding amid the rubble of discord and waiting for Europeans to add value to bonds of citizenship rather than counting sums of money.

Please read our comments policy before commenting.

Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of EUROPP – European Politics and Policy, nor of the London School of Economics.

Shortened URL for this post: <http://bit.ly/1Hz5D0E>

About the author

Lambros Fatsis – *University of Sussex*

Dr Lambros Fatsis teaches Sociology at the University of Sussex. Since 2012 he has been commenting on the Eurozone crisis from the ‘[Sociologists of Crisis](#)’ column for The Sociological Imagination online magazine.



-