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The Great Game

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To read the press here in Greece, as well as in that far distant place most Greeks now refer to as 'Europe', one could easily conclude that the current crisis is about debt. The Greeks have acquired lots of it. Their creditors now want their money back. But the Greeks show no sign of being willing or able to pay any time soon. Hence the impasse in which Greek debtors and European creditors now find themselves.

Of course the crisis is about much more. There are other issues at stake. The problem is that both sides have a completely different understanding of what the issues actually are.

For the Greeks it is self-evident. It is about a failed austerity programme that was fast destroying their country even before Syriza came into office. As an angry Greek suggested to me the other night in Athens, the problem right now is not the current government: it's all those crooks who went before! Maybe. But stay in Greece for more than a few days and you soon find out it is about much more besides. First, it is about Greek national pride, and the very strong belief in the country that Greece should not be pushed around by foreigners. And second, it is about that most Greek of all political ideas: democracy. Which is one of the reasons why Tsipras called that controversial, but

deeply symbolic, referendum last Sunday.

Needless to say, none this is of any interest at all to the creditor countries. The Greeks might have invented democracy and had a seriously tough time with some other countries in the past. But that doesn't mean they shouldn't pay their bills. Or live within their means. Or claim privileges for themselves which others less pampered than they – like the Irish and the Portugese – have been denied. For all these reasons, and no doubt many more besides, Syriza is at best not trusted, and at worst, quite literally hated by many politicians in Europe. Tsipras may quote Greek philosophers to his heart's content. But that doesn't cut much ice in Berlin, Brussels or Strasbourg. The left may admire him. Some may even see him as some sort of swashbuckling Robin Hood figure leading Europe out of the terrible impasse in which it now finds itself. But his numerous opponents from across the continent just can't abide the man with his confident demeanour, anti-establishment rhetoric, and equally casual, anti-establishment dress code. 'Why doesn't he wear a tie for goodness sake' a conservative Greek once asked me?

But behind all this there is something far more significant going on, and not just on the floor of the European Parliament where Tsipras recently spoke in his typically rock star way. Hinted at by some, but without being talked about too loudly by most politicians, this particular game is as important as any that has been played in Europe since the end of the Cold War. Indeed, it bears more than a passing resemblance to an idea that made its debut during the Cold War itself: and that idea, crudely stated, is that if a single country tries to challenge the established consensus, it will inevitably have a destabilising demonstration or 'domino' effect on several others. So the contagion must be contained and the country in question be forced to pay a heavy price 'pour decourager les autres'. This will certainly hurt the country in question. Which is unfortunate. But that will at least have the effect of dissuading anybody else foolhardy enough to trip lightly down the same irresponsible path.

Viewed in this way the Greek crisis takes on a much wider significance for Europe as whole. And it's not just about debt. It is about something else – namely, Europe's political future. Will this future be shaped by a set of 'liberal' economic rules that take it as read that there is bound to be a lot more restructuring pain before there is ever going to be any real material gain. Or will it, as Syriza's many enemies out there now fear – and fear with some reason given the fragile state of Europe – be increasingly shaped by those on the radical left (and even the populist right) who feel that the liberal economic model is bust and needs to be replaced by something else that will return 'power to the people'. This in reality is what is now at stake.

The Greeks today obviously – and understandably – feel that they are occupying centre stage. That the current struggle is all about them. But in a very important sense Greece has become something of a side-show – albeit a very important side-show



– in a much bigger game where the stakes could not be higher. We live, as the Chinese are always quoted as saying – probably unfairly – in ‘interesting times’.

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