

“The Battle of Bastards”: Game of Thrones, the EU Referendum and Greece

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We all saw the last episode of Game of Thrones, entitled “The Battle of the Bastards,” in which a battle takes place between John Snow and Bolton Ramsey. Despite the fact that John Snow is warned about Ramsey’s notoriety for placing sophisticated traps against his enemies, and a willingness to sacrifice their lives in pursuit of victory, John Snow ignored Sansa’s advice and fought when all odds were against him; casting into doubt his strategy, leadership and political skills. This appears highly topical following the recent referendum on Britain’s EU membership.

The momentum for the battle of the referendum was a similar circumstance, and David Cameron did not live up to the standards that a “Battle of Bastards” and, even worse, History had set. Boris Johnson, Nigel Farage and the xenophobia, nationalism, populism, racism and the nostalgic adherence to a historical past of a once upon great empire are represented by Ramsey. They placed the traps for a battle that David Cameron called without preparation at any level. Personal ambition for re-election was preeminent in his reasoning; being remembered as an unskilful, somewhat ridiculous and mindless politician and leader is the trap that History places for all who failed to understand that their political career is bound to the historical conditions they produce.

Sansa or, in the case of the referendum, the statistics and studies with findings emphasizing the social, health, education and economic inequalities had indeed warned Mr Cameron for a long time. Blinded by his personal ambition and arrogance, Mr Cameron did not see the traps that his rivals had placed for him, falling into each and every one of them. He then, of course, retreated home, escaping the consequences by resigning.

What comes as a surprise though is that he did not even fight. On the other hand, Boris and Nigel, just like Ramsey, did not waste their energy into really going into battle. All they did was turn to people’s instincts, evident in Hobbes’s state of nature, namely fear, hatred, a discourse around lack of resources, social competition and resentment of the unknown. Not at any point of time did we see the Remain Camp systematically fight the shameful and bogus arguments of the Leave Campaign with rationality and facts. It wasn’t until this weekend that Nigel Farage admitted *himself* that earmarking £350 million for the health service was a “mistake”. Similarly, numerous studies which the Leave campaign based their arguments upon were unreal or, as Boris Johnson admitted personally, had not been read by them. By not fighting the arguments of the Leave Campaign became crystallised and substantial in people’s minds, and unfortunately, this aligned with the social reality they experience in the disadvantaged areas they live in.

Coming from Greece, this is the second referendum I'm faced with in almost a year. The consequences are all the same and strangely, this is the first time that my home country, Greece, started sharing so many similarities with my current home where my friends and life are. The United Kingdom, falling from the fifth economy of the world a week ago and is now the sixth, is a stark reminder of the economic fortunes of my own home nation. The winner in this “Battle of the Bastards” were xenophobia, racism, populism, hatred, propaganda, division and, of course, worsening living standards for the vulnerable, poor and disadvantaged. As in Greece, it will not be the elites who will face these consequences; once again, it will be the working and lower middle classes.

One would wonder how a referendum in a bankrupt country like Greece would bring about the same consequences in Britain, a country with such a different political culture and parliamentary history and a far stronger economy. Sadly, the recipe and ingredients are commonly known. First, you require an arrogant, benighted, overambitious leader who cannot live up to the expectations that History and his own people have placed upon his shoulders, locked away in his own world away from the social reality his people face. Then, you mix this with a lack of solidarity from the European Union and, last but definitely not least, a celebration of neoliberal policies and austerity leading to widening inequalities. All the by-products of the above have made people from disadvantaged backgrounds mobilise from their natural, pre-political instincts which had previously been encouraged and fed with the populist, false arguments of the Leave Campaign.

But isn't this a battle that David Cameron started in the first place and isn't he the one responsible for the consequences? He called out for a referendum, as Alexis Tsipras in Greece did. Despite the high turnout in both the referenda, it has become obvious that this is a meaningless way of turning to the people for their opinion. Both the deal in Greece and the U.K. that the people had to simply accept or reject comprised of thousands of pages and conventions. Not to mention plenty of free time and a very advanced level of analysis within a vast array of disciplines to fully comprehend. And even if one succeeds in this, I highly doubt they would answer in one word with a YES (NAI) or a NO (OXI), a REMAIN or LEAVE. What the people in both countries did, is that they expressed their resentment to the establishment of each country, their contempt for the European Union as it currently operates and, their intolerance of their current living conditions.

But hadn't Sansa warned them before the battle? Hadn't we, sociologists, economists and political scientists, warned the politicians for the current state of the people? Numerous studies with regards to health, housing and all sorts of inequalities have been produced in the past years. Sansa had indeed told them but they ignored her. And this is the reason why at the end of the day division and hatred prevailed in both Greece and the U.K. in the aftermath of the referendum. None of these referenda should have been proclaimed in the first place. It was the leaders' responsibility not to have alienated themselves from the people's social reality. Instead, to have been brave enough to reduce austerity and bridge the different parts of the U.K and the different social classes in Greece by reducing inequalities.

The same goes for the European Union. It is high time the European Union stood together by effectively responding to the people's demands, by showing solidarity and by establishing human and workers' rights in a more robust fashion. It is indeed a great time for social scientists to live in, but isn't it a greater time for political leaders to prove their historical value? Another “Battle of the Bastards” continues to endure, the one between markets and politics. It is the historical duty of political leaders to listen for their peoples' demands and reduce the rampant power of the intangible financial markets that oppress their people. History awaits them and their name could be remembered either in combination with the words self-ambition, arrogance, division and decline or vision, empowerment, emancipation and progress.

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