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ARTICLE



## Alternatives

# The rise and retreat of Syriza: an interview with Michalis Spourdalakis

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### ABSTRACT

Syriza is the only radical Left party to be elected a national governing party since the worldwide economic crisis began in 2008. In this interview with political theorist Michalis Spourdalakis, a founding member of Syriza, we discuss the unique strategic relationships between social movements and the new radical Left parties such as Syriza, the struggle to maintain the party's independence amid co-optation into the Greek state and broader European Institutions, and what the Syriza experience can teach us about attempts to transform capitalist states.

### KEYWORDS

Syriza; Greece; radical Left parties; Eurozone; austerity

## Introduction

The Greek political party, Syriza, is the only party of the radical Left to be elected as a national governing party since the worldwide economic crisis began in 2008. Syriza, which means “from the roots,” has garnered intense scrutiny around the world, both for the anti-austerity politics that brought it to power and for its subsequent retreats amid the austerity regime inflicted by the European “troika”—the European Central Bank, European Commission, and the IMF. Indeed, Syriza is perhaps the best case study of the dilemmas confronting radical Left politics today. In particular, it illustrates the fraught tensions between, on the one hand, “office-seeking” approaches that prioritize winning and maintaining governing power, even if the balance of social forces is such that austerity can only be mitigated and not entirely overturned and, on the other hand, “policy-seeking” approaches that would rather defer or relinquish government office until changes in this balance of forces make possible a genuine alternative to austerity. The former tends to offer less partisan policies that will appeal across broad constituencies in order to win more immediate electoral victories and governing influence. Since their policies are increasingly oriented towards relatively short-term electoral success, however, they are in danger of co-optation by the existing institutions and practices. Policy-seeking approaches on the other hand emphasize more partisan policies through which they attempt to persuade and represent pre-defined constituencies deemed to have distinctive and long-term policy goals. They want

to preserve the integrity of radical Left visions of alternatives to austerity and capitalism, but by ceding the more immediate publicity and influence achieved through government participation, they risk permanent marginalization.<sup>1</sup> Since 1989, a broad tendency towards office-seeking behaviour has supplanted policy-seeking approaches among radical Left parties,<sup>2</sup> adding further significance to the Syriza experience.<sup>3</sup>

After Greece adopted the euro in 2001, irresponsible loans between European banks and Greek governments resulted in a massive debt crisis in 2010. By the time Syriza formed the government five years later, Greece's Gross Domestic Product (GDP) had fallen 25 percent, unemployment averaged 23 percent, and the number of Greeks living below the poverty threshold of 2005 increased from 16 to 42 percent.<sup>4</sup> From the outset of the debt crisis, the troika has used the threat of Greek default and a Continent-wide financial meltdown to make bailout packages conditional on major austerity measures and neoliberal reforms. Although Syriza typically polled below five percent before the crisis, it gained popular support quickly because it actively participated in the increasingly militant egalitarian social movements, was a defiant critic of the troika's austerity conditions, and nonetheless followed the majority of Greeks in wanting to remain within the European Union and the Eurozone. Syriza's political programmes promised to reverse austerity while balancing budgets through ambitious public investment. This would be funded by hardline negotiating of debt relief, restructuring the broken tax system, and eliminating rampant government corruption. With this inspiring alternative, Syriza became the opposition party in 2012, held a congress to dissolve its coalition of parties into a unitary party in 2013, and won the national election in January 2015. Indeed, Syriza's rise might have been too rapid: it seems that its electoral victories have gone beyond its capacities as a political party.

Soon after the election, the new Prime Minister, Alexis Tsipras, and the Minister of Finance, Yanis Varoufakis, began bailout negotiations with the Eurozone finance ministers, widely known as the Eurogroup. The intransigence of the hegemonic powers in Europe, the German Chancellor Angela Merkel and her Minister of Finance Wolfgang Schäuble, showed immediately their desire to make Greece into an example of what will happen if any other European governments challenge the EU's neoliberalism, especially those countries with emerging radical Left parties, such as Podemos in Spain and Bloco de Esquerda in Portugal. Although Greece had spent much of the economic crisis in recession, the troika demanded that the Syriza government turn a primary deficit of 1.5 percent into a primary surplus of 3.5 percent every year until 2022, mainly by cutting wages and pensions, privatizing major airports, harbours, and energy infrastructure, and by liberalizing labour markets through, among other things, weakening collective bargaining rights. Known as the Third Memorandum, this proposed bailout programme would be the tenth austerity package signed by a Greek government since 2010.

In a national referendum on July 5, 2015, unexpected popular mobilizations inspired 61.31 percent of Greeks to vote against the troika's bailout conditions. *Όχι*, the Greek word for "No," became an international rallying cry against austerity. Tsipras used the referendum to renegotiate minor parts of the Memorandum, but his government ultimately voted to accept it. Many, including within Syriza, regard this as a capitulation. In particular, a party tendency—the Left Platform (LP) led by the Minister of Energy, Panagiotis Lafazanis—vocally opposed the Memorandum and

insisted on the feasibility of exiting the Eurozone despite Greece's decades of deindustrialization and immense dependence on imports. After the vote, they left Syriza to form their own party, Popular Unity.

To bolster his support, Tsipras triggered a snap election on September 20, 2015. Syriza won with 36.6 percent (six seats short of an absolute majority) and formed another coalition government with the Right-wing anti-austerity party, the Independent Greeks. New Democracy, the centre-right opposition party, maintained its vote-total with 28 percent. The far-Right neo-Nazi party, Golden Dawn (XA), increased its total from 6.3 to 7 percent. The hastily formed Popular Unity did not win the 3 percent necessary to enter parliament. The election turnout was 56.6 percent, the lowest since Greece's democracy was restored in 1974. This reflected a combination of disillusionment and election fatigue—it was the fourth snap election since 2009 and the third nationwide vote in 2015 alone.

Most recently, on May 18, 2017, the Syriza government received a disbursement of funds from the Eurogroup by signing the fourteenth austerity package since the debt crisis began. It commits Greece to achieving a primary surplus of at least two percent every year between 2023 and 2060, a level of consistent growth that has never happened in any country since World War Two.<sup>5</sup> In recent public opinion polls, Syriza has dropped significantly behind New Democracy. Nevertheless, even when polls show that 89.5 percent of Syriza voters are disappointed with its performance, 64.5 percent believe that none of the other parties provide a better alternative.<sup>6</sup> Meanwhile, Popular Unity is polling below two percent. This can be little solace for Syriza and its supporters. It is as if Syriza—"from the roots"—is a tree that was taken from the sun-drenched National Gardens and planted inside that which they surround, the sheltered and shadowy corridors of the Greek Parliament. Although Syriza has not been cut entirely from its roots, its branches have been withering and dying since it was removed from its proper soil—the social movements.

Michalis Spourdalakis is uniquely placed to offer insights into all of these issues. He is a founding member of Syriza, a former member of its policy-planning committee, and is now the chair of its committee on Syriza's proposed constitutional amendments to deepen democratic participation. He is a professor of political science at Athens University, the current Dean of its School of Economics and Politics, and a board member of the Nicos Poulantzas Institute. His publications include *The Rise of the Greek Socialist Party* (1988), *Populism and Politics* (in Greek, 1990), and *PASOK: Party-State-Society* (in Greek, 1998), as well as recent essays on Syriza in the *Socialist Register* (2013) and the *Transform! Network Yearbook* (2016). These interviews were conducted on August 28, 2016 and August 17, 2017. They have been edited because of space constraints.

## Paul Christopher Gray (PCG)

### *First interview: August 28, 2016*

**PCG:** Thank you, Michalis, for taking the time to do this interview. First, I want to focus on Syriza in the years leading up to the national elections that brought you to power in January 2015. You have said that, unlike the traditional "mass parties" of

the radical Left, Syriza was a “mass connective party.” How would you describe Syriza’s relations with the social movements before 2015?

**Michalis Spourdalakis (MS):** Syriza started to come together around 2004 through the Left Dialogue Forum. The forces that gathered around this initiative, including *Synapsismos*, which was the largest party, as well as other smaller Left groupings, decided strategically to emphasize our presence in the social field by participating in the social movements. However, this participation was different from the old Leftist parties in Greece, which tried to manipulate or take over the movements with party practices. Instead, we participated in these movements rather than patronizing them. We did not impose our will on them. We were there as radical Leftist individuals, groupings, and subgroupings in order to support them, to provide them with political, legal, and other kinds of resources, and to learn from them. That was a key strategic choice that built trust between the people in and around Syriza over a decade. A key development in this relationship was the 2008 youth uprising. Syriza was the only political force in the country that really supported the uprising. Given the tendency among the establishment media and the conservative political forces at the time, this had great political costs for Syriza, at least in the short term.

**PCG:** After 2012, there was a downturn in social movement mobilizations in Greece. Meanwhile, it became clear that Syriza could win the next national election. Did the party overemphasize parliamentary strategy rather than helping to initiate new struggles between the 2012 and 2015 elections?

**MS:** Between 2012 and 2015, a few major things happened. First of all, Syriza decided to put its own organizational house in order, so to speak. Up until that point, Syriza was a federated type of organization where very small groupings and much larger political parties, some with parliamentary experience, carried the same weight. Procedures occurred in an inefficient, uncoordinated fashion. After the 2012 election, several steps were taken to organize the party. In the first national meeting in December 2012, the first Central Committee of Syriza was elected. Furthermore, some very good radical documents were produced and significant decisions were made. In the summer of 2013, the first Congress of Syriza was held. Instead of talking about strategic goals and innovative ways of organizing, however, most of our time was spent on deciding the processes of electing the leadership.

This actually did not help, it appears. Because the party did not emphasize the social field, we did not develop new issues, a new agenda, nor enrich the old ones. The only thing we did is take advantage of the fact that because we had become the leading opposition party and had more funds from the state, we gave a part of these funds to the solidarity networks. A provision in the party constitution states that 20 percent of the income of the Members of Parliament will go to the party and 20 percent into a fund to support solidarity movements. Although we strengthened the solidarity movements a little bit, in that period we focused on building the party. As far as the strategy was concerned, it is obvious that the downturn of the social movements assisted the tendency of the party leadership to emphasise the struggles “in the parliament.”

The final point I will make is that, in the lead-up to the 2015 election, the Right-wing coalition government collapsed because of disagreements about constitutional procedure and fights within the parliament. It was not the result of mass

mobilizations, strikes, or protests. That is not entirely the fault of Syriza. It was a combination of Syriza failing to innovate in the social field and the lack of political energy coming from the social movements. Everyone thought that Syriza would come into power and solve this because we appeared to be the “serious” radical governmental party with a programme that could ameliorate all of the harsh austerity policies.

**PCG:** Former party member and prominent member of the “LP” in Syriza Stathis Kouvelakis argues that, after 2012, rather than recruiting from the social movements, Syriza primarily recruited opportunists who had left the sinking ship of the Panhellenic Socialist Movement (PASOK), the traditional social democratic party. He also asserts that Syriza shifted to a leader-based party with a more passive membership. Finally, he claims that the party leader, Alexis Tsipras, shifted to an overwhelmingly parliamentarist strategy that focused on building bridges with diplomatic and military circles within the state. What is your take?

**MS:** The LP was not the Left-wing of the party, but the conservatives. This might sound a bit odd given the dominant interpretations of the LP in the press of the international Left. The LP is regarded as the most radical because they said that we should leave the Eurozone. Nevertheless, in their everyday politics, in their absence from the social movements, they were only to the Left of the old communist parties, not the new Left party. Why was the LP the conservative wing? First, Lafazanis, the leader today of the LP, was very much opposed to Tsipras allowing or pushing—depending on your perspective—the neoliberal “modernizers” to leave *Synapsismos* and therefore Syriza. Second, the LP was never really active in the solidarity movements. They thought that the solidarity movements were philanthropic activities that confuse class politics and give people the wrong impression that capitalism can be reformed. Third, some of them were never so forthcoming in giving their constitutionally mandated compensation to the solidarity movements. Having said this, the criticisms of Syriza’s parliamentarism, of its “governmentalism,” are well taken.

There is some confusion about what the government does. The government has a different temporality and set of constraints than the party. It must build certain alliances in the locales of power. Nevertheless, the party became dependent on the government instead of taking initiative, checking the government, and pushing the leader to comply with the rules of the party constitution.

**PCG:** What was Syriza’s relationship with public sector workers, administrators, and ministers before taking office? How much did Syriza know about how the state actually works before entering it? Did you enter government believing you could learn it as you went along?

**MS:** (Laughing) Sorry, I am laughing because that can be a very quick answer. Very little or not at all. We had some contacts with the union of civil servants. As MPs, we made some bridges to several government departments. We talked to people. In retrospect, however, we had no idea, and still have no idea, how state power is articulated through the networks of the civil servants. No idea whatsoever. We were so naive. We were so instrumentalist because we did not want to appear partisan, but we are making one mistake after another. We allow a lot of opportunists or pro-establishment people who subvert us to remain in their positions. For example, about six months ago, we introduced a celebrated piece of legislation that would reorganize the civil servants in order to reduce clientelism. In the Greek tradition, the senior deputy

minister is always appointed by the political leadership of each department. According to this new legislation, these people are going to come from the civil servant careerists. After 40 years of the Right-wing and “modernizing” parties completely permeating the civil servants, what kind of person is going to be the deputy minister in each department? What kind of politics will they implement? Radical politics? This new legislation, which was celebrated as anticlientelistic, will basically support the positions of the old regimes, of the establishment, which will continue to be strong among the civil service for the time being.

Even where we choose the people in the various committees in the public sector, our choices tend to be technocratic and not political. Given that there is very little leeway after the Memorandum, and after the defeat of last year, you need your own people to exercise their imagination, to rely on the party, to do things differently. But we had no methodology of how to enter the state, of how to democratize the state. We were not prepared at all.

**PCG:** Learning the internal workings of the state is difficult enough for any young radical Left party, let alone one that must simultaneously engage in unprecedented negotiations with a much more powerful entity like the European Institutions. How can radical Left parties better prepare for the unique tasks of governance? How can you initiate a project of democratizing the state before you have actually been elected?

**MS:** That is the one million dollar question. First, you need to have a certain methodology of how to recruit the people. Is the criterion that the person is an expert in the field of, say, energy policy? Is this enough? Since corruption is endemic to the reproduction of Greek capitalism, you have to recruit people who are honest. There have to be some kind of guarantees that they will serve the strategies of the party. These kinds of debates and this kind of methodology are not there.

Second, the internal democratic organization of the party must operate as a preparatory stage for most of the decisions we will have to make and implement when in government, when we come to power. Syriza did not have this preparation whatsoever. We had an internal party democracy that was much better than anything else we knew on the Greek Left, but that was not enough.

Third, the strategy that led you to victory should never be forgotten. That is very important. Syriza’s strategy was based on its presence in the social field. We prioritized the unity of the Left and were very tolerant among the competing views and initiatives. For example, in the summer of 2013, the previous government abruptly shut down the national broadcasting corporation. The majority of the workers there occupied the building for five to six months with the great support of the social movements, the Syriza MPs, and the general public. The workers also established and broadcasted along the lines of self-management. That was the basis of their organization. The movement produced knowledge. It put forward new ways of producing things. They did a number of things that were outside of the ordinary. Syriza promised that as soon as we get into power, we will re-open the national broadcasting corporation. When we introduced legislation to re-open it, none of the knowledge produced in these five to six months played a role in the legislation. The re-opened broadcaster was not based on the self-management of the workers. On top of that, we not only rehired all of the strikers involved in the project for self-management, but also all of the scabs! The militants, the heroes participating in something new and



fresh, are now being forced to work together with scabs. This moved away from the strategy that led Syriza into government. That strategy can be renewed and adapted, but should never be forgotten.

Right now, the media channels do not pay the government to use the airwaves. At the very least, I would expect a radical Left government to introduce legislation that each of these major channels must give a certain amount of space—say, one, two, three hours a week—to the communities for free for the purpose of public broadcasting. This would use the capacities of the state to shift the power to the subaltern classes, to the people, and bring the people to the centre stage. This is worth the risk. But, Syriza should be more daring and it is not. That is my major criticism.

Fourth, when in power, we have to initiate policies that solidify the coalition that brought us to power. During the years of protest, the years of moving into power, a broad social coalition formed. It included wage-earners, both public and private sector workers, precarious workers, the unemployed, especially the unemployed youth, as well as the old and new petty bourgeoisie. It also featured a number of strata, such as tradespeople, craftspeople, and shopkeepers, as well as the educated professionals such as architects, engineers, lawyers, and doctors. This is not an imaginary coalition, as some academics have argued. This was shown by the presence of this coalition in the streets during 2012–2013, the years of resistance. All of these classes and strata participated actively in the anti-austerity movements. Now, an old-fashioned government will say the shopkeepers have one kind of demand, so let us respond to this demand. The craftspeople have another kind of demand, so let us respond to it. In the new way, however, the Left government should always think about how, by responding to the various burning demands, it can support the interests of the whole or a good part of the coalition. That requires a lot of imagination. It is much easier to come into power through protest and to express the broad interests of this coalition than it is for the Left government to attempt to change social relations, to continue to express the interests of this coalition in a different kind of framework and logic. So far, Syriza has not managed to do this and does not even think this way. It continues to act as if it is any other kind of government.

**PCG:** Can you give me an example of a policy that Syriza could have implemented that would have had that uniting effect on this coalition?

**MS:** Greece has a huge strata of small shopkeepers with three to ten people in each shop. Their survival is very difficult. One way of dealing with the issue is the neo-liberal way: let them die. The old way of trying to ensure their survival is by alleviating some of the pressure of taxes on each shop. But, this only reproduces them in a petty bourgeois, selfish, atomized way. A more innovative way of protecting them would introduce major tax breaks if they organize into associations and co-ops and transformed the way they reproduce themselves. That is at the level of economics. At the level of politics, there was a lot more that Syriza could have done because, in this field, there are fewer constraints in terms of the Memorandum. Nevertheless, with few exceptions, Syriza has not managed to be innovative and effective in controlling the state. For example, we had many incidents of police aggressiveness against protestors. This is another way Syriza failed to mobilize policies that solidify this coalition.

**PCG:** There is a widespread tendency among radical Left parties that when they get elected, the best party members, their “cadre,” get absorbed into government offices,



which deprives the party and allied social movements of the important organizers and activists that are so crucial for maintaining their independence. This hinders their ability to provide support for, but also to put pressure on, those parts of the party that are “inside” the state. Has this happened to Syriza? Is there a way to plan for this before taking office?

**MS:** Yes. This happened to Syriza. We were not prepared for how to actually get into the state. We were not prepared even in terms of education. I do not know what the understanding of my comrades was—that we are going to get in there and start giving orders and that these orders are going to be obeyed? It seems to me that even among the experienced members, we did not share a common understanding of what state power is.

Another mistake was that, during the negotiations with debtors in the first seven months of government power, the party did not do much. It was expecting the government to act and tried only to mobilize within the country. Members of the Central Committee (CC) or prominent party members were not asked to go into other key European countries and meet and mobilize with the movements, unions, and radical Left parties. It is not only that most of the capable cadres moved into the government, but also, it seems to me, that the party became beholden to the government.

As far as the future is concerned, it will be very difficult to overcome this problem because we lost a great number of good people. I am not only referring to members of the LP, but also other very capable people who left the party and did not join anything else. And so, one task of the party, especially as we move towards the October Congress, is to leave our doors open to all of the people who got disillusioned. Nevertheless, there are also people in the party who believe that its role is not that important except as an electoral mechanism. This is a major problem. This will occupy a great deal of the debates before and during the upcoming Congress. There are even some who argue that we do not need recognized tendencies within the party because of what happened with the LP. They operated as a party within the party. So, these people argue that we do not need tendencies. That is very problematic.

Since a deep political crisis preceded the fiscal, economic, and social crisis, Syriza had an easier path to government power than is usually the case. Many party members overestimate how easy it typically is to win power. Therefore, they do not realize the importance of the party. Syriza has too many committees. Now some people say “This is inefficient. Who needs all of these committees? We have the government and the various experts in the departments who can do all of that.” They assume that we are going to be in power forever. No, the party is forever; being in office has an expiry date. One tries to push it further and further away, but to be able to do that, you need to have a party, a strong party.

Politics is all about timing, and learning by a process of trial and error does not help. Perhaps you cannot catch the momentum again.

**PCG:** Is it better for a radical Left party to take office even if it means it can only implement austerity policies in a less harsh way, or is it better to refuse entering government until it has built enough power to implement an alternative to neoliberalism, even if it means, in the meantime, that austerity will be imposed by centrist or Right-wing parties in a much harsher way?

**MS:** Again, this is a key question that puzzles the Left. One easy answer is that it all depends. What are the conditions, what are the available alternatives, how prepared are you, and so on. Nevertheless, I believe that the Left should assume government responsibility, including as a partner in a government coalition, under almost any circumstances.

As far as Greece is concerned, there is no question in my mind that Syriza was right to take national office. It should have done it slightly differently, but it should have done it. It seems to me that the people voted for Syriza because they were expecting a different kind of politics. They did not support Syriza because they were expecting austerity would go away. They did not expect that economically we would do much better. They expected more democracy. One key idea in the Greek “revolution,” if it is not too cocky to call it that, is self-respect. The people expected self-respect, not primarily in terms of economics, but in the relations between citizens and the state. They hoped that they would play a more active role in their own lives and have more control of their representatives.

Governance and managing state power is twofold. One aspect is the usual power that involves the ideological and coercive mechanisms of the state. But another aspect of administration also has to do with capitalizing on the advancements, the capacities, and the knowledge produced by social movements. For example, they did a fantastic job during the refugee crisis by providing health services. The government can support endeavours like this. In this field, Syriza’s government is very slow coming. Under the pressure of the Memorandums and austerity, it has forgotten to emphasize this area. Nevertheless, the people know that this is going to be hard, but they want Syriza to do it. They do not want the other parties to do it. That is why Syriza managed to win the election after the major split in September.

In general, abstention from capturing government power will lead to apolitical apathy and the retreat to micropolitics. That is your situation in North America. You have a very strong social Left, but you never penetrate political issues at the macro level.

**PCG:** I have a follow-up question. You have talked about people leaving the party and how it is going to be very difficult to win back that momentum. Has Syriza taking office created its own forms of apathy and people reverting to micropolitics? Does a radical Left party that implements austerity necessarily delegitimize radical Left politics? Does this reinforce the idea that “there is no alternative” to neoliberalism?

**MS:** You always run that risk. Social change is not mere prescription. According to Marx, given the economic conditions, the Russian Revolution should have been impossible. But, this major revolution was based primarily on political demands. No, you will not give people the impression there is no alternative if, in addition to implementing austerity policies that you do not agree with, you introduce a number of social movement and party initiatives in the cracks of the prevailing social order. If there is a criticism of Syriza, it is in this field. But what if Syriza attempts to implement, say, two major “non-reformist” reforms in the fields of health and education? Even if we completely fail and we end up in prison or in exile, people around the world can build on this experience. It is really worthwhile.

**PCG:** Syriza thought it might have some wiggle room to undermine austerity within the terms of the Memorandum. In July 2015, how much wiggle room did you think

there was and how much have you actually had in the time since? Have you been able to use those cracks to implement these alternative policies?

**MS:** There is very little room. Even in areas that, one would assume, have nothing to do with fiscal issues, we are blocked by the European Institutions. For example, legislation to democratize the administration of the universities, which has nothing to do with spending one euro more, is blocked. In some areas, we have achieved certain things. More than two-and-a-half million people in Greece who did not have access to public hospitals and health services do have access now. Employment has increased. Now, are these good jobs? No. The government is the first to say that we have had job creation, but they are not good jobs. They are part-time jobs. A lot more could have been done.

It is not just the Memorandum. It is the obstacles put forward by local forces too. The inertia of state power, the war waged by the establishment, is massive. The five major media channels spread misinformation every day. For example, it is well known that, for several years now, some prominent members of Syriza have cottages on the island of Aegina. Tsipras often takes his kids there. Last week, there was a major accident involving a speedboat. Four people died. For about four or five days, the whole media world said that it was a government person who caused the accident. Can you imagine? For four or five days, they said, Well obviously because some government people go to this island, Syriza is corrupt, they have all of this money, they drive speedboats, they are reckless, they kill people! Every day we have things like that.

You have to remember, too, that we have a coalition government. Of course, Syriza is the major power, but one third of the cabinet members are not Syriza members. Some were Syriza allies during the years of resistance, but many come from the technocrats.

**PCG:** Do you think that the European Union can be transformed from within, can be made more democratic, or must the long-term goal be exit?

**MS:** No, it cannot be transformed from within. For those of us who are internationalists and therefore pro-European, the last few years have been a great lesson. The EU does not have a democratic deficit; it is simply an undemocratic structure. You cannot mend it. It is structurally capitalist and is therefore undemocratic. Europe has no future. It is much easier to imagine how Europe will go down the drain than how it can be reformed from within. It is not that something has gone wrong. It was wrong all along. That is the lesson we have learned.

Exit is another story. The reproduction of Greek society, or, say, of Italian society, has become so intertwined with Europe over the last 30 years. Greece is not Britain. Certainly, we cannot leave now. It is another thing to say that you are building alternatives. It is very abstract, and, yet, a very real field of struggle. This thought just occurred to me. It seems to me that the story of the EU is like modernity. It has a lot of faults and contradictions, but the alternatives to modernity have to go through modernity somehow. Meanwhile, you have to build your productive infrastructure. In the last 15 to 20 years, this country has completely undermined, if not destroyed, its productive infrastructure. Greece produces an insignificant amount of oil. How could we exit? In that sense, Tsipras was right when he compromised, when he gave in to the coup of last summer. He said "I don't want to become a hero for two days and a criminal for the rest of my life." If he had come back and said we blew everything

into pieces, for two to three days people would be very enthusiastic, including probably myself. But, then we would turn around and would need to be heated in the winter or drive our cars to our jobs. Exit is almost impossible unless there are major developments in other European countries.

**PCG:** As a board member of the Nicos Poulantzas Institute, you know that Poulantzas, a Marxist theorist of the state, argues that whenever a radical Left party is elected to certain offices or apparatuses of the state, the ruling classes will shift the real power to other apparatuses where the radical Left party has less control. For example, certain labour policies and functions can be transferred from the Ministry of Labour to the Ministry of Finance. Do you think that this strategy also occurs within political parties? Here is an example of what I mean: In July 2015, the month of the national referendum and the signing of the Third Memorandum, Tsipras refused to convene the CC of the party. Former Syriza members argue that this is because the majority of the members of this particular committee would have voted to reject the Memorandum. Did Tsipras use the strategy Poulantzas identified, but rather than using it in the state, he used it within the political party itself?

**MS:** Tsipras definitely prioritized government power over party democracy. Nevertheless, when the majority of the members of the CC signed the letter to have a meeting, the Secretary General of the party and prominent members of the Left-wing grouping waited for Tsipras to give his “OK” to call the meeting. They did not say “Because we have the signatures of more than 50 percent of the CC members, the party constitution states that we can have a CC meeting, whether or not Tsipras calls for it and attends.” Yes, Tsipras acted as the Prime Minister of the country and not as the leader of the party. But, the party also narrowed its expectations within the confines of Tsipras’s initiatives. The party has become dependent on the government and not the other way around. As we approach the second Congress, the party must create some autonomy from the government, so that it can be useful to the government.

**PCG:** The political party has become dependent on the government. Is this the definition of co-optation? Are you saying that Syriza as a political party has been co-opted by Greece as a state?

**MS:** These things are rarely totally clear, but, yes, that is the tendency.

**PCG:** How can Syriza rebuild that momentum? Is it impossible given how little wiggle room there is within the terms of the Memorandum?

**MS:** We should shift the debate into democratic reforms of the state that will affect the everyday life of the population. I think as Leftists we have lost the ideological battle at the level of economics. We cannot win if we continue to draw our attention to questions of public or private, state or market control. Meanwhile, neoliberalism attacks democracy, the basic formal definition of democracy. Wolfgang Schäuble, Germany’s Federal Minister of Finance, says “Why should we care about elections in Portugal? In Spain? Let us form a government and get it done.” At this level, it seems to me that there is still room for the Left to win major victories. To build momentum, we must attack the area where the enemy has not won completely: the area of democracy. That is the reason Syriza should stay in power.

**Second interview: August 17, 2017**

**PCG:** Syriza had its second Party Congress in October 2016. What were its most significant debates and decisions? You said, in our first interview, that there would be two significant debates at the Congress. First, the extent to which Syriza would become a strictly electoralist party rather than one actively engaged in social movements and civil society organizations. Second, whether or not party factions would still be permitted. Did either of these debates occur? If so, what were the results?

**MS:** Yes, all of this was debated extensively. First of all, factions or tendencies within the party continue to be recognized. This issue was resolved before the Congress. Right now, there are four official tendencies. First, there is the Unitary Movement, which is the majority and is basically composed of people who are close to Tsipras and the leadership. Second, there is the Group of 53, the Left-wing of the party, which is quite critical of the bailout agreements and some of Tsipras' actions. Third, Platform 2010 is a smaller, more centrist tendency. And, fourth, the social democratic tendency is equally small and is composed of people who came from PASOK. The spirit of the Congress was well to the Left. It is no accident that people like [the Finance Minister, Euclid] Tsakalotos, a leading member of the Group of 53, got the most votes to the CC.

There was also extensive criticism of the way that the party moved into power between 2012 and 2015, of its electoralism, and the way in which parliamentary debates and struggles prevail over the mobilizations in civil society. Now, Syriza never had an explicit lack of commitment to the social movements. Rather, they had been in a slump after their peak between 2010 and 2013. And Syriza never had the capacity to mobilize. Its strength was participating in the movements, giving them direction, and providing them with personnel and resources. Nevertheless, the Congress promised that more considered efforts would be made to put forward alternative or parallel policies that will alleviate the negative effects of the austerity programme.

There was also a unanimous statement adopted by the Congress that the Memorandum is not Syriza's politics, but a defeat, a strategic retreat made in July 2015. Finally—and this is very important—it was recognized that in due time we need an organizational Congress because the party has dated structures that cannot serve our strategies and policies. Syriza has the social divisions of labour typical of the mass parties of the 1930s. Despite the fact that it has organized tendencies, it has a very hierarchical structure. We are going to organize a special Congress to solve these organizational problems and to find a clear distinction between party and government.

**PCG:** Do you know when that next Congress will be and what organizational reforms might be proposed?

**MS:** No. Every once in a while, CC meetings mention that we should go ahead with this organizational Congress, but nothing concrete has been put forward. As for organizational changes and reforms, these are even more vague. I must say that, after all of these months, the party is in the dark. The party does not know what to do. Basically, the party follows and supports the government. It pushes or criticizes the government too rarely and politely. There has been a stagnation of capacities. For

example, Syriza's radio station used to be a very innovative part of the party. Now, they have not paid their employees, and the director has moved into the private sector. Similarly, the party's daily newspaper is more conformist, more pro-government than it should be.

In terms of the party as an entity, the second Congress was very good. There was a great presence of the Left, and it was critical of our first round in government. Since then, however, I think that governmentalism has taken over more of the party.

**PCG:** I want to return to some of the things you said in our first interview. You said that radical Left parties should assume government responsibility under almost all circumstances. Using the terminology of theories of political parties, you think that the radical Left should be much less "policy-seeking" and much more "office-seeking." Policy-seeking parties tend to emphasize partisan policies that strongly represent pre-defined constituencies deemed to have distinctive policy preferences. Conversely, office-seeking parties try to appeal to wider electorates in order to gain more immediate electoral success. The strategy, then, is to participate in government, achieve these more moderate policies, and use the momentum to push for ever more radical demands.

Syriza has followed this broader office-seeking trend, and you have said that it was right to do so. And yet, in our first interview, you also said two things that would seem to demand a much more policy-seeking approach. First, you agreed that a major problem for radical Left parties is that, when they are elected, many of their most committed and important party members, their "cadre," become absorbed by government offices and functions, to the detriment of the party's independence from the state. It would seem, then, that the party should only participate in government to the extent compatible with retaining many of the cadre whose focus is building those parts of the party and social movements that are outside of government offices and functions. In other words, the party's electoral strategies and goals should be limited to what can be achieved with a significant portion of its cadre committed to building sources of collective power that are outside of the state, and thus can apply external pressure to it.

Second, you argued that since the EU cannot be transformed from within, exit from the EU is necessary even if it will only become possible when there are major developments in other European countries. If this is the case, it seems that there are at least three reasons why radical Left parties would have to spend more time out of office: first, they would need to educate and persuade their own constituencies. After all, given the state of Greek public opinion when Syriza was elected the national government in January 2015, the party would not have been elected if it had supported exit, or even if it had been more open to it; second, they would also need to form alliances and movements with radical Left parties in other countries capable of shifting the broader balance of power in Europe; and, third, they would have even more profound challenges developing socialist capacities among party members and broader constituencies given all of the difficulties that would arise from exit, including re-establishing a national currency and coping with its likely de-valuation, struggling for the domestic balance of forces necessary to establish capital controls and democratic planning of the economy, accounting for de-industrialization and dependence on imports, and so on.



My question is, then, do your assertions about the absorption of party cadre and exit from the EU contradict your more office-seeking orientation? Will radical Left parties have to become much more policy-seeking in the sense of doing much broader and deeper development of socialist capacities before they attempt government participation and becoming the governing party?

**MS:** It seems to me that this distinction between policy-seeking and office-seeking parties is theoretically useful. It makes clearer the dilemmas of strategy and it is useful to find the differences between a traditional social democratic strategy and the old communist strategy. Nevertheless, the distinction does not apply to Syriza. The party was both policy-seeking and office-seeking from the beginning. Cautiously, Syriza said we are the party that comes from the struggles in the social field, the movements for feminism, civil rights, ecology, and the solidarity movements. The party comes from an informal social alliance among the working class, the precariat, the unemployed, the petty bourgeoisie, as well as the civil rights movements. We are also a party for the unity of the Left, of all tendencies and traditions of the Left. Syriza was unique in this respect. It put forward programmes that were a mix between the experiences coming from activity in the social field and the knowledge produced by intellectuals and scientists. That was the promise, anyway. In practice, it is a different story because of the defeat of July 2015.

After moving into power, and especially after the defeat, Syriza has become more office-seeking, more governmentalist. In the negotiations with the European Institutions, the government is moving, if only slightly, towards justifying the compromises that the government was forced to make. As a result, the social alliance that elected Syriza twice has been undermined. The European Institutions want to break the backbone of that alliance by demanding things that make no fiscal sense, such as the reforms of the universities that have nothing to do with economic demands. And the government's main arguments slowly, but decisively, move towards economic fiscal rhetoric, which has taken over the political discussions. The government presents its policies in a general way to everyone, not as policies coming from the social movements, the workers, the Left, the party. So, the Left has been defeated, above all, at the ideological level. We experience the defeat of the ideas of the Left when the Left is in power. It is in a worse situation than when it was not in power.

The government has been operating in a very naive way, I must say. There is no strategy there. The promise of Syriza was that it was both policy-seeking and office-seeking, but after the retreat, all of the policy-seeking habits have been undermined as the office-seeking practices become stronger. Therefore, it is easier to be seduced by state power. This is a clear tendency.

**PCG:** If the party had problems with its organizational structures, and if in many respects the party members, including the party leadership, did not have strategies to deal with the questions of power within the Greek state and European Institutions, does that indicate that Syriza was too office-seeking from the beginning? If Syriza had insufficient organizational structures and strategies before it took power in 2015, even if it could get elected, would it have been better in retrospect if Syriza did not strive to become the governing party?

**MS:** Let me tell you, this exactly is in the mind of some of my comrades in Syriza, and some of them are prominent members and Left-wing too. I do not agree with



that. I do not want to be too sloganeerist here, but we do not choose the conditions in which we make history. Due to the policies and mistakes of the other parties, Syriza had a chance to move into power. It had to do it. It had to enter power with all of its contradictions, with the defeat, and now it has to become more active in its transformation of the state. In the government, Syriza has a little leeway to do things and, in fact, it has made a great difference. For example, many people have access to health care because Syriza is in power. You cannot deny that. Three thousand Greeks have some kind of food on their table now, and they have electricity and water because Syriza is in power. There is no question about that.

Nevertheless, I agree that the solidarity policies of the government should not be put forward in the way they are now. They should emphasize our class bias towards the working class. We do not say this. Just like all good social democrats would do, we justify our policies simply by saying that they are better than all of the others instead of saying clearly to our enemies on the other side that, yes, we are putting forward these policies because we want to continue helping our class base. We say this in the party documents, but not in the government communications. That is why I say that the major defeat is on the level of ideas, of principles, of values of the Left. It is ironic and paradoxical that the ideas of the Left are in retreat, and are probably going to be defeated, with the Left in power, with the radical Left in power.

**PCG:** You said that you disagree with some of your comrades in Syriza who think that you entered government too soon because, to paraphrase Marx, we make our own history but not in conditions of our own choosing. But, parties, even though they are collective entities, have some agency in deciding how they interact with their conditions. Why did the circumstances in 2015 mean that, to your mind, there was no choice, that Syriza absolutely had to take government power? Over the last few decades, austerity has been consistent, the militarization of the state has been consistent, the attacks on workers, the oppressed, and the marginalized have been consistent. You can always use that as an argument to take power as soon as possible, to start trying to effect change. But, if that is the position you hold, you will almost always take power too soon. How do you decide when you absolutely need to take power? What is the balance between trying to stop the attacks, but also being adequately prepared?

**MS:** I do not know. I am afraid this is where people like you and me in the political sciences profession have little to say. It is instinct. This is how you judge the conjuncture at this particular historical moment. You can feel the pressure from the people that you have to assume that responsibility to stop the bleeding of the subaltern classes. Then you take the chance. I think it was an excellent choice to take power, but Syriza moved into power by compromising, to a certain extent, its policy-seeking characteristics, its unique elements. It should have moved quickly into power, but at the same time it should have gone into the election working more to educate popular capacities, to prepare the alternative, for example, of being able to introduce a national currency and to threaten more effectively that we are going to leave the Eurozone. This was part of the original plan. There was no rigid distinction between Plan A and Plan B. The original idea, expressed by the Left-wing of the party and by Tsakalotos himself, was that our Plan B is a part of Plan A because we wanted to prepare the capacities of the movements to be able to resist more effectively when the time comes. But, that preparation was not done.

**PCG:** Even if the balance of forces within Europe became much more favourable and Syriza could achieve some of its more radical demands, do you think Greeks would be receptive and would engage in the mobilizations necessary to help push through these demands? Or, since Syriza became the governing party without being sufficiently prepared to transform the state, does this mean that it will be forever included within the general disillusionment and mistrust Greeks have with “establishment politics”?

**MS:** The Greek people are quite disappointed, disillusioned, and pissed off. I am afraid that Syriza has a lot of work to do to overturn this feeling. Otherwise, it will lead to very conservative choices in the future. It seems to me that the likelihood is not to have mobilizations, but the disillusionment of the people might lead to a Macron-type venture as the eventual outcome of this whole crisis. Of course, we know that this is not a long-term solution. France is a prime example of that. A few months after Macron’s “great” victory, many now ask “How did we choose someone worse than [the former President of France, Francois] Hollande?” No, the Greeks are not ready for mobilizations because, for at least three or four years, these people mobilized a lot, confronted the police and tear gas, fought in the streets, and brought Syriza in from the margins of the political system. And now the people are completely disappointed. I think it is good that Syriza is in power. It is good that the Left of the party is strong. But, is this enough to transform society? Certainly not. I am not even cautiously optimistic.

## Notes

1. Mair, *Ruling the Void*, 81–83; March, “Radical Left Parties,” 203–10.
2. Bale and Dunphy, “In From the Cold?” 275.
3. Lafrance and Principe, “Building ‘Parties of a New Type’.”
4. Hellenic Statistical Authority.
5. Zettelmeyer, “The Eurogroup on Greece.”
6. University of Macedonia; Chrysopoulos, “New Poll Shows New Democracy.”

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