
Letter from Greece: Brief notes on Revolt and Crisis in Greece and the Greek situation

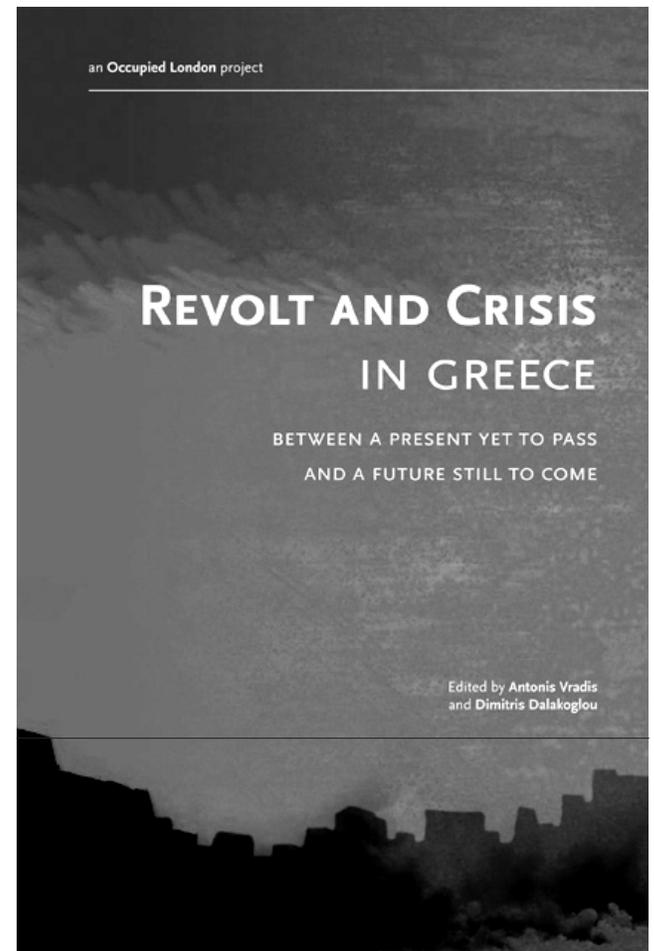
Review of Antonis Vardis and Dimitris Dalakoglou, eds., *Revolt and crisis in Greece: Between a present yet to pass and a future still to come* [Oakland: AK Press & Occupied London, 2011].

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The book

"What is happening here exceeds us." [199]

THERE IS A BAD THEORETICAL HABIT common among leftists: the confirmation of revolutionary aspirations through an unmediated verification by the "facts" or "data." The ghost of an "objective" reality obscures the effort to grasp the "concrete" as the combination of many abstractions and, instead, "a chaotic representation [*Vorstellung*] of the whole" (Marx) is preferred, offering a temporary foundation for self-affirmation and miraculously turning a "bad" reality into a "good" one. A more critical way to regard "facts," related to the pursuit and furtherance of freedom in society, is forgotten if not defamed today. As Max Horkheimer once put it: "But in regard to the essential kind of change at which the critical theory aims, there can be no corresponding concrete perception of it until it actually comes about. If the proof of the pudding is in the eating, the eating here is still in the future. Comparison with similar historical events can be drawn only in a limited degree."¹ While our ability to change the world diminishes, the problem of the self-serving fallacy of reference to the insuperable "objective" character of reality becomes more apparent.



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To cite some recent examples, various anarchists, under the rubric of the political tendencies of "communization," found a verification of their theories in the English riots. This falls into a pattern: Nepalese guerillas "verify" the aspirations of Maoism; the struggle of "indignados" verifies libertarian impulses; and, finally, the Arab Spring and the Wisconsin protests verify for the entire global "Left" that we are on the right track. People feel obliged to prove repeatedly that the "struggle continues," only to forget the fact of our impotency. To recall a verse by Stéphane Mallarmé: "*Le Néant parti, reste le château de la pureté!*" ("With nothingness gone, there remains the chateau of purity!") Experience assures the "Left" that its nothingness is dispelled, so that its chateau of purity can stay intact.

This is the manner in which the book under consideration approaches the case of the Greek December of 2008, specifically the uprising that marked it. To avoid any misinterpretation, this is a typically anarchist work, albeit of certain flavors. December 2008 in Greece is treated as a glorious, although temporary "event,"²

affirming a way of thinking and acting, and helping to sustain these for the future. The book, we are informed, is about the “social antagonist movement” (14). So much wishful thinking is contained in these three words! The volume has many merits and is excellent for familiarizing oneself with aspects of contemporary Greek reality. That said, the remainder of this intervention will focus on some of the book’s more problematic aspects.

Before doing so, we must briefly review the volume’s main contents. The editors present this work as “a collective attempt to map the time between the revolt of December 2008 and the crisis that followed” (14), offering material on both the former and the latter in three parts. The first part—entitled “The site: Athens”—is an introduction to the context of December’s events, offering a critical analysis of Athens in comparison to other cities across the world, as well as explicating the political atmosphere of the city and some relevant developments within it. The second part—“The event: December”—explores the events themselves. It begins historically, with the first essays covering the development of social struggles in Greece since the end of the military junta (1974), the recent period of “structural” capitalist transformations in the country, and the evolution of alternative media in the years preceding December. This approach leads to viewing December as the culmination of prior developments; the remaining essays in the second part draw attention also to what was radically new by shedding light on various aspects of what happened and what this means for Greece and the “movement” in general (as well as the way December is conceived abroad). The third and final part of the book—“Crisis”—provides a wealth of information about the Greek crisis, emphasizing the opportunities for change that it presents. According to the contributors, the crisis itself necessitates not only action but theory, and the attempts presented and described here all point to potential fulfillments of anarchist conceptions of this demand.

Turning our attention to the volume’s central arguments, it should be noted that the text is structured around a wide range of issues, all of which can be characterized as elements of reality—“data”—supposedly unaffected by our subjectivity: a chronology of events, accounts of urban planning, alternative media, class, existential private feelings, etc. It is on the basis of such “data” that the contributors feel licensed to offer their political estimations. However, the most important factor of contemporary reality is constantly evaded: namely, ideology. Certainly, the necessity of ideology is difficult to address. Regardless of this difficulty, as an expression of our critical consciousness and self-understanding—and, hence, of politics as a realm not reducible to the reactions of the oppressed—ideology must be taken into account. Insofar as there is any treatment of ideology in this book, it is at the descriptive level of history and remains external to the events themselves. The consciousness of past events—e.g., “*metapolitefsi*”³ (211)—as well as the “self-criticism”⁴ (199) contained in these essays is insufficiently critical. The context remains one of constant self-affirmation: modern Greek history is presented not as a series of defeats and failures but rather as the

history of struggles culminating in the event December.



The Greek left protests the murder of Alexis Grigoropoulos, December 2008.

History is presented in an almost mythological manner, with December represented as its peak, recalling something like an eruption of natural forces. Its insurrectionist moment is presented as one that can change our lives along the lines of an unexpected tsunami impelling us towards freedom—too bad that it never really does, since freedom requires something more than blind movement! *Mutatis mutandis*, the anonymous power of capital comes to mind: a promise of emancipation never fulfilled and the blind hope that at some point it will be, despite all past disappointments. The poverty of events results in the poverty of theory, with images of December 2008 as the “culmination” of, or perhaps even surpassing, May ’68 (110 and 51).

It is worth examining in detail the two long essays, strongly characteristic of the volume as a whole, written by an “anti-authoritarian communist group from Athens”—“Children of the Galley” (TPTG) – whose work is heavily influenced by Gilles Dauvé. In a somewhat mysterious fashion, the event of the uprising is presented as a result of class transformations erupting spontaneously (that is to say, objectively). The failure of the uprising is presented as a result, again, of class transformations and class composition (once again, objectively, but “objective” as before, along the lines of a positivist sociological conception that dogmatically assumes the separation of subject and object and thus fails to grapple with social practices as forms of consciousness). According to this interpretation, the uprising failed due to socio-economic limitations and the state repression that followed. What does one make of this argument? The following conclusion is inescapable: as representatives of the Left, we are perfect and would achieve the world if not for these objective limits and the repressive state.

TPTG praise the “spontaneous and uncontrolled character of the rebellion” and they do not concern themselves with the problem that the lack of left-wing organization and leadership typically means unconscious right-wing—and thus regressive—organization and leadership. The foundation of their analysis is “class” as a separate object. “Class” determines everything. TPTG views political mediation as pathological (118 and 121), as if to accept or reject it is a matter of taste—as if, out there, something can exist immediately for us. Anarchists have never sympathized with dialectics!

With a penchant for extreme reductionism, TPTG explains the capitalist crisis as an exploitability crisis of labor power driven by the proletariat's supposed resistance. The Greek crisis was provoked by proletarian struggles and December was responsible for accelerating these struggles (and, hence, the crisis) [253]. Absent from this account is any reckoning with the decay and eventual death of the international Left over the course of the twentieth century. "Give me a place to stand and I will move the world." TPTG have given themselves such a place. Namely, class: "the real cause of the crisis: the convulsive but persistent refusal of the global proletariat to become totally subordinated to capital" [270]. What Lenin would have called their "economism" or "tailism" is fully exposed in the ceaseless quest for "autonomous proletarian action" [270]. As a comrade of mine remarked, people all around the world try desperately to organize themselves politically—except for people like TPTG!

TPTG, seduced by their own anti-Leninism, confuse the problems of the self-valorization of capital with the proletariat's acts of resistance. If anything, crises are a product of bourgeois "equality" and its normally functioning exploitation. In the era of the First World War, it is true that the proletariat's struggles brought about the crisis of capital, at its depths, but this was only due to the mediation (cursed for TPTG!) of the revolutionary leadership provided by figures such as Lenin and Luxemburg—and this crisis was, simultaneously, the eve of revolution (in the sense that revolution is bourgeois society in its acute crisis, not the total overcoming of bourgeois society).⁵ If catastrophes and crises continuously occur—but without any prospect of overcoming them—it is precisely because of our failure to successfully resist subordination to capital, not because we resisted it so well! It is the failure of the Left (that is, our failure) that accelerates the crisis. TPTG is like the boxing coach who, during a fight, keeps congratulating his semi-conscious athlete until the final devastating knock-out blow is delivered by the opponent.

The analysis of the crisis remains superficial throughout the book. This is by no means accidental, for there is no Left in crisis to expose acutely the symptoms of the crisis itself. So, for example, Yiannis Kaplanis's contribution (and, on this count, the contributions of others as well) is for the most part descriptive. David Graeber's chapter is transhistorical in perspective and thus fails to deal with the peculiarity of debt in capitalist modernity. "Money" and "debt" are not discussed and explored as mediations of value, but rather as ruling-class impositions on society and in terms of "the arbitrary nature of power."⁶

It is not the case that the editors and contributors do not understand the problem of "the lack of a well-developed theory" [23]. It is the case, however, that "revolt" is presented in these pages as an automatic process precisely because of our increased inability to change the course of world events. We seem to have internalized the famous image of the chess-playing automaton provided in the first of Walter Benjamin's "Theses on the Philosophy of History" [1940]—the very image that he used to criticize the false optimism of "historical materialism"! Fantasies of a practice without theory are supplemented by fantasies of a theory without practice: It is difficult to determine if this is merely an indication of thoughtless irresponsibility or also the expression of a real cul-de-sac. The problem, however, is fully revealed: For the editors, "more significant than the sequence of events is

the occurrence of the events themselves" [24].



Greek anti-austerity protests in Athens, June 2011.

The situation in Greece

The contemporary situation in Greece is related to the aforementioned issues: the "Left" in Greece thinks of itself as possessing the most appropriate theory and praxis for emancipation today, and is waiting for the "masses" to follow its prescriptions. The fact that the "Left" as it is presently constituted (indeed, across the globe) is part of the problem, or indeed is the *central problem*, is never seriously considered. Once again, a dogmatically separated and fully equipped "observer" awaits her "object" of verification. "The struggle continues" in our minds in order to avoid reflecting on its extinction!

Rather than separately examining all aspects of the contemporary "Left" in Greece, we will briefly sketch an outline of its principal tendencies.

Despite the ongoing unprecedented (for post-war Greece) economic catastrophe, it is obvious that the Left is not advancing here in any sense. It is this unavoidable truth that provides the solid basis for a serious discussion of the Left's decline in Greece (and across the world). Despite the massive offensive launched against the working class and the spectacular "resistance" to it, nothing yet has happened to benefit the Left or the working class. All are waiting for higher vote totals in the next elections to verify their significance. The fact that the right and even the extreme right are also waiting for an even greater increase in their share of the vote does not seem to bother anyone on the "Left."

When the first symptoms of the Greek crisis, in its recent more acute and urgent forms, broke out, our problems as a "Left" in Greece emerged as well. While previously, when such urgent issues appeared, we felt free to luxuriate in our utopian speculations (as more or less paper exercises), things are now much more serious. Bourgeois class representatives present the situation as a black-and-white choice: either austerity or catastrophe. Of course, this is a lie—but in an alienated world, lies do not lose their strength simply by being revealed. Ideology is more real than any "actual" reality, and it must be taken seriously and worked through in order to possibly be overcome. If we are going to delegitimize the "Establishment" and its "solutions," are we ready to

offer any alternatives? If we are going to accelerate the crisis, could this lead to any progressive development? While pondering these questions, the words of Hal Draper return again and again: Marx argued “against both those who say the workers can take power any Sunday, and those who say never.”⁷ Can we indeed take power “any Sunday?” And, if not, how can we avoid falling into the abyss of thinking that we can never do so? And, to put it bluntly, how can we even try to think in such terms when the only “reality” available to work with is the one the “Establishment” is offering us?⁸ To deny austerity does not seem to open up a path to emancipatory social-political struggle but rather to a rogues’ gallery of right-wing pseudo-saviors, discontented sections of the capitalist class, nationalists, bureaucrats, et al.

Karl Korsch’s words haunt the present situation: “Over a long period, when Marxism was slowly spreading throughout Europe, it had in fact no practical revolutionary task to accomplish. Therefore problems of revolution had ceased, even in theory, to exist as problems of the real world for the great majority of Marxists, orthodox as well as revisionist”⁹—how much more true today! The “Left” in the crisis in Greece is eager either to suggest pseudo-radical/reformist solutions, pointing to earlier phases of capitalist development (e.g., calls to nationalize the banks), or to attempt miraculously to be a true “revolutionary” agent in the absence of a real revolutionary situation or even a real possibility of one. In both cases, “actionism” and “impatience with theory” (to recall Adorno’s 1969 essay “*Resignation*”) reigns. Reformists and revolutionaries are trying desperately to prove that they are such in a period of “resistance,” when neither reformism nor revolution seems possible.¹⁰

From abroad, many leftists not well acquainted with the present dangers of authoritarianism in Greek society (and with their bank accounts probably safe in one of the leading capitalist countries) have recommended that Greece simply “default” (with the casualness of suggesting a nice evening walk!) and accept a period of deeper crisis, with the hope that things will be better for “emancipation” in the long run. It seems that these individuals want simply to oppose any capitalist development in order to prove that they are “anti-capitalist”—as if capitalism can be opposed from the outside, and as if they are posing an “alternative” to capitalism. They persist in the belief that “structural” or “systemic” change may lead to real politics, when in actuality the basis for such politics does not exist.

Let us consider a historical example of this reasoning. In the Arab world, various nationalist leaders were supported by leftists in previous decades in the hope that pure structural changes would improve emancipatory prospects. The Arab Spring, in its unfolding tragedy, demonstrates how the “ruse of reason” trusted by these leftists simply leads to more disasters. Our friends from abroad have forgotten that any “structural” change within or beyond capitalism necessarily involves issues of (false) consciousness.

Turning our attention to some of the basic problems that left-wing politics in Greece has exhibited during the recent period, we must raise the issue of the continuing Stalinism of much of the Greek “Left.” The term “Stalinism” is not intended to point to issues of authoritarianism, although these remain problems as well. It is used, rather, in the sense of “socialism in one country” (and “nationalism”). Across a wide range of the “Left” spectrum in Greece, the contemporary situation is presented in the following light: the government consists of traitors or incompetent people and Greece will be

able to perform fine (or, simply, better) economically on a national level in different political conditions (with regard to these conditions, opinion varies among tendencies pointing to a progressive government, a popular front, a popular power, or even “socialism”). This perspective tends to ignore, or to oppose abstractly, international developments, with the danger of making things worse.¹¹ Of course, most of these leftists would say that they aspire to an international struggle but nothing in their proposals and programs convinces one of this.¹²

The only “internationalists” that transcend this Stalinist national framework are either the capitalist exploiters themselves or reformists who cultivate illusions about the nature of capitalist social relations and institutions that supposedly can be “reformed” for the benefit of the majority. In both these aforementioned tendencies (“internationalist” and nationalist), what is common is the appeal to technocratic “solutions,” which begs the question of politics and emancipation.

Finally, there are segments of the “Left” trying to overcome the aforementioned Scylla and Charybdis of Stalinist nationalism and capitalist internationalism. But they remain without any serious political influence and, more importantly, try to deal with these problems abstractly, offering transhistorical prescriptions that involve copying and pasting combinations of the supposedly “correct” balance of theory and praxis. A mistake typical of such an approach is the invocation of the historical Bolshevik demand regarding the national debt—namely, to erase it (which they accomplished). But today’s ambitious “Bolsheviks” forget that the historical Bolsheviks made similar demands when not only Soviets but also the Second International existed!

In contemporary Greece, an agent of potentially emancipatory change does not exist. It is imperative to recognize our impotency so that we might overcome it. Right now, we pay witness to increased oppression but not to a historical consciousness capable of grasping it, working through it, and potentially overcoming it.

With regard to the issue of authoritarianism, what is meant (from a Marxist perspective) is the tendency of people to revolt against an authority only in favor of another one. The spectacular activism of the oppressed may involve an attempt to constitute another form of oppression. In Greece, we have witnessed various examples of this tendency, and the mention of a few of them will serve to illustrate the point. In the 1990s, hundreds of thousands of the oppressed marched in northern Greece in a nationalistic/reactionary fervor regarding the issue of “Macedonia’s” name. During the next decade, thousands followed the lead of a reactionary archbishop and demonstrated against the reform that prohibited the reference of religion in identity cards. In both cases, “shadowy” authorities were presented as a threat to national sovereignty and the oppressed raged against them only to strengthen real social domination. Finally, in recent years we have seen a series of pogroms against immigrants involving not only the tolerance but also the participation of important elements of Greek society (including elements of the oppressed). Immigrants are the scapegoats by which the oppressed “revolt” along lines that are in accordance with their oppressors. Certainly, this kind of authoritarianism has existed since the nineteenth century (post-1848) and persists to this day. The phenomenon of authoritarianism is not mentioned here in order to impugn struggles for emancipation, but only to

emphasize the crucial importance of taking it under serious consideration in any such struggle. Unfortunately, such considerations are not entertained by the Greek "Left" today. Anti-capitalist struggles within capitalism cannot avoid grappling with the specter of authoritarianism. It is only with a consciousness of such dangers that these struggles might generate progressive prospects.¹³

In conclusion, returning to the most obvious problems of the Greek "Left" today, it must be recognized that the "movement" of the "indignados" did not manage to pose a political alternative (which it was incapable of doing in any case, under the present conditions). On the contrary, its overall failure has rendered this lack of an alternative more acute and obvious.¹⁴

What will happen after the "summer vacations" that followed the "spring offensives" (to recall the title of an old Murray Bookchin article)? As things stand right now, any development is likely to bring more catastrophes. In dealing with this problem, there is not only a necessity to act but also a necessity to think, the latter possibly being of greater importance since no one seems to be doing it. Various forms of resistance are indeed necessary. Equally necessary, however, is a critical recognition of what the nature of this resistance is and what its prospects actually are. As Adorno once put it: "The deluded workers are directly dependent on those who can still just see and tell of their delusion. Their hatred of intellectuals has changed accordingly. It has aligned itself to the prevailing commonsense views. The masses no longer mistrust intellectuals because they betray the revolution, but because they might want it, and thereby reveal how great is their own need of intellectuals."¹⁵ **JP**

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1. Max Horkheimer, "Traditional and Critical Theory," in *Critical Theory: Selected Essays* (New York: Continuum, 2002 [1937]), 188–243.
2. Some contributors to the book, following Badiou's notion so much in vogue today, view December as an "event." The mystification and emptiness contained in this jargon is apparent when one realizes that for this kind of reasoning the Great French Revolution of 1789 and December are both "events."
3. As explained in the glossary of the book (339), "*metapolitefsi*" (literally meaning "political transition") is a term "used to describe the historical period of modern Greek history that follows the end of the colonels' dictatorship (1974). Many believed the revolt of December 2008 to signify the end of *Metapolitefsi*." Christos Lynteris's article fails to adequately grasp the fundamental character of the present as the self-transformation of metapolitefsi, which was itself the self-transformation of Greece after the Second World War. To be more accurate, instead of labeling these historical developments as self-transformations we should refer to them as self-regressions, for nothing "real" about *metapolitefsi* is revealed by the current crisis. Apocalypse under these conditions is more obfuscatory: it is impossible.
4. Soula M.'s contribution is also problematic insofar as its perspective remains external, thinking of problems of bourgeois consciousness as characteristic mainly of the oppressors and not of December, in its momentous purity.
5. In this sense, Christos Lynteris's assertion that Marx supposedly considered crisis "to be a structural trait" (209) is equally one-sided.
6. Graeber has recently published a book on this very topic: *Debt: The First 5,000 Years* (New York: Melville House Publishing, 2011).
7. Hal Draper, "The Two Souls of Socialism," *New Politics* 5.1 (Winter 1966): 57–84. Available online at <www.marxists.org/archive/draper/1966/twosouls/>.
8. For decades, the Greek "Left" has simply been following capitalism's orbit, trying to "resist" its dynamics, while the initiative was/is always left to the ruling class. Perhaps this was unavoidable, but it is positively reactionary to present this "resistance" as a series of successes.
9. Karl Korsch, *Marxism and Philosophy* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1970 [1923]). Available online at <<http://www.marxists.org/archive/korsch/1923/marxism-philosophy.htm>>
10. Similar issues were discussed lucidly by presenters on a panel on the problematic forms of anticapitalism today organized by the Platypus Affiliated Society. A transcript of the forum, "The 3 Rs: Reform, Revolution, and Resistance," is available online at <http://platypus1917.org/2007/11/12/the-3-rs-reform-revolution-and-resistance/>
11. For example, a reason why some sections of the "Left" demand an exit from the EU and the Eurozone is in order to implement an independent monetary policy, citing in support of such action the possibility of devaluing

the currency and antagonistically increasing Greece's share in international exports. In appropriate conditions, such developments could trigger more virulent forms of nationalism and much worse.

12. Quite popular at present is the idea of forming some sort of front (national or popular) to "resist" an attack that is considered similar to the Nazi occupation of Greece during the Second World War. This conception of capital as an aggressor outside the nation-state is unacceptable, especially for Marxists.

13. With regard to the KKE's (the Communist Party of Greece—the largest "Left" party in Greece) authoritarianism, the problem again is not so much their strict manner of organizing (which is preferable to the non-organization of the anarchists) but with the illusions they cultivate, in particular that the problems of authoritarianism (or of post-1848 capitalism) can be resolved

at the national level by a "popular front" under their leadership. This is the central problem with their sympathies for Stalin and is bound up with the ease with which they are capable of baptizing another form of capitalism or authority as "socialism."

14. This "movement," of course, given its importance, suffers from both its "anti-authoritarianism"—baptizing incoherence as merit and lack of organization and vision as hope (confirming again, today, that "direct democracy" is usually invoked so that people can maintain the illusion that everything will happen spontaneously and miraculously)—and its authoritarianism, which is on display in its hostility towards, and even rage against, trade unions and class issues in general.

15. Theodor W. Adorno, "Imaginative Excesses," *New Left Review* 200 (July–August 1993): 12–14.