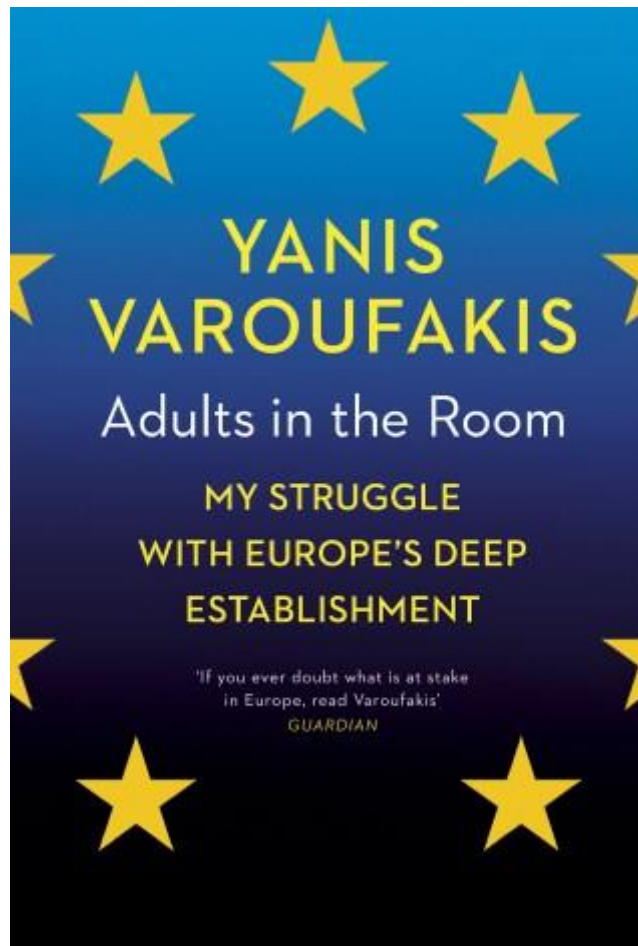


## Closed Rooms and Class War

Review of *Adults in the Room: My Battle with Europe's Deep Establishment* by Yanis Varoufakis  
(London: Bodley Head, 2017)

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Yanis Varoufakis strode the world stage from January to July 2015, becoming the world's most celebrated finance minister ever. His every pronouncement and lifestyle choice was floodlit in the international media. He shunned suits and limos and instead wore leather and rode a motorbike. He showcased his gym-enhanced biceps, his artsy wife and acropolis-view apartment. He was dazzlingly articulate and delivered macroeconomic explanations to fellow finance ministers who did not want to know. He shed light on the dark dealings of Greek and global finance to a public who did want to know.

It was not only his star persona that commanded such attention. The whole world was watching Syriza from 2012 when they nearly won the general election in Greece and this intensified in 2015 when they did win. Many in Greece and abroad saw this as opening a new path for the radical left and for a population desperate to reverse the downward trajectory of their lives. The stage was well set for Varoufakis to play a starring role. Negotiations with the troika began in the hope that Greece might exit the debtor's prison and take some control over their fate, while remaining in the

eurozone. The troika played with them duplicitously and ruthlessly, while the Greek government, particularly Varoufakis, alternated between ingratiating and defiance in response. Finally, they capitulated and Alexis Tsipras signed a memorandum agreeing to measures worse than anything they had previously rejected or had just been rejected in a resounding referendum. Varoufakis portrays himself as heroically standing against this capitulation, but I am not convinced that he would not have been party to it had Tsipras not asked for his resignation shortly before this.

This book gives his account of the events leading up to his becoming finance minister and the period when he held that position, opening up the closed rooms where the masters of the universe so cavalierly and contemptuously decide our fates. He tells us “our bailiffs keep their distance from their victims, barricading themselves in five-star hotels, whizzing around in motorcades and steadying their occasionally flagging nerves with baseless statistical projections of economic recovery”. He presents himself as both insider and outsider to this world. As if sketching a scene for a film script, he recounts a meeting with Larry Summers in a Washington bar, where Summers tells him that must decide which he is going to be. It is clear that Varoufakis glories in being one of them, while still wanting us to believe that he is simultaneously on our side. He speaks of how great it was to have support of Larry Summers, Norman Lamont and other figures on the right, but it is support for whom and for what and in whose class interests? Class analysis is far from the foreground of the picture sketched out here.

It is a chronicle of elite-pacting far removed from the lives being impacted by the deliberations of these elites. Varoufakis does not seem to grasp how elitist his own *modus operandi* is. It is not only in closed rooms with Christine Lagarde, Mario Draghi, George Osborne, etc, but even in his meetings with his own ‘comrades’ that he reveals himself. In his version of his earliest meetings with Alexis Tsipras and Nikos Pappas, he formed a ‘covenant’ with them, a five-pronged economic strategy, overriding Syriza’s existing policies. He shows contempt for Syriza’s democratic structures and expresses doubts about Tsipras still feeling a concern about them. Tsipras and Pappas assured him that he need not be burdened by Syriza’s decision making processes. Yet he and they criticise the EU for its lack of transparency and democracy.

This book tells many truths that need to be told. Varoufakis lucidly explains the whole ‘extend and pretend’ dynamic, where Greece was never ‘bailed out’ but forced, through many layers of subterfuge, to bear the burden of bailing out German and French banks, while plundering wages, pensions, municipalities, hospitals, schools and public property to do so. He recounts many conversations with those imposing these measures, where they agreed with his arguments and admitted that their policies could not possibly work, even in their own stated terms, only to go and say the opposite in public. This book does a service in bearing witness to that.

However, this book conceals as much as it reveals. Most importantly, he does not conceptualise clearly the socio-historical forces at play, both because of an overbearing egocentrism and a lack of systemic analysis. Capitalism disappears in the play of elite personalities, primarily his own. The title comes from a comment from Christine Lagarde saying that what the situation needed was ‘adults in the room’. Varoufakis complains that there were too few adults in the room, as if this explains what happened. Who said and did what obviously played a role, but despite the power of certain personalities, Wolfgang Schäuble above all, what was at stake was the pressure of the global system itself upon any government or party or movement threatening its dominance. He does use the term class war at one point, but not in a way that comprehends how this is the core story.

His publisher tells us “In this fearless account, Varoufakis reveals all”. This is not so. It constructs a narrative, selects some facts and omits others in a way that is blatantly self-justifying, even distorting. He constantly uses phrases like ‘my solitary struggle’ and tells the story in a way in which everyone else's role is blurred, distorted or even invisible. Syriza barely exists. The Greek left are nearly absent. The Greek people are a blur in this book. It is a landscape of elite players and anonymous masses. A man named Lambros stands in for people of Greece. Early in the book he appears as a translator for a foreign news crew interviewing Varoufakis. He had lost his job, home and family in the crisis. He implored Varoufakis to do something, not for those like him who had already been felled by the crisis, but for those still hanging on by their fingertips. Varoufakis reminds of us through the book of his vow to Lambros. In August 2015, he informs us that Lambros was no longer homeless due to a bill he enacted. However, it was Syriza, with the running made by alternate finance minister Nadia Valavani, who passed this bill for humanitarian relief in defiance of the troika.

This is a Lone Ranger narrative. Varoufakis, who played no part in the building of Syriza, who even exited the country at the peak of its trials, rides in to save the day. Syriza activists, even ministers, are minor players, who either help or hinder him in his heroic struggle to save the people. It departs from the Lone Ranger story, however, in that here the baddies win.

He declares early on that there are ‘no goodies or baddies in this book’, but only people doing their best, as they understood it, in circumstances not of their choosing. This is not, however, how he writes it. There are definitely goodies, primarily himself and his band of star foreign economists, and baddies, although he is kinder to the troika than to certain figures in Syriza, whom he accuses of treachery. His preference for figures of the right, such Norman Lamont and Jeffrey Sachs, over the left, as well as his conceptualisation of many matters, make me wonder if he even understands the difference between right and left. Of course, many declare this distinction outdated, but I do not. There is need to differentiate between forces analysing and opposing capitalism and those who see it as inevitable even desirable. His perceptions of various characters, including Tsipras, Dragasakis and Pappas, are fascinating, but so are their perceptions of him, which are told in tavernas and perhaps eventually in other books.

This book is far from a definitive account of these momentous events. I hope there will be many more books coming at this from different experiences and perspectives. I have written one of them – [The Syriza Wave](#) – which is a counterweight to this one, because it brings many more voices and experiences into play and attempts to address the balance of forces and rhythms of history in a way that his does not.

Another angle on how this book is not relentlessly honest and does not reveal all are his omission of incidents which do not reflect well on him. He makes no mention of his *Paris Match* photoshoot, which opened him to scorn in Greece and abroad. Here was already much criticism of the time he was spending giving media interviews and the Syriza paper *Avgi* had editorialised about ‘toxic overexposure’. Varoufakis projected himself as Prometheus, but revealed himself more as Narcissus.

Even more glaring an omission is his failure to account for his actions in the days of July 2015, when he was no longer finance minister but still a Syriza MP. On 15 July, when the first crucial vote on the measures dictated by the troika was taken, Varoufakis absented himself from parliament and retreated to his villa on the island of Aegina. When the next vote was taken a week later, a bill of 977 pages of oppressive measures, he voted yes. In August, on the ultimate vote on the

memorandum, he finally voted no. He recounts “we received more than a thousand pages – which read as if translated from troika-English into Greek by something like Google Translate ... The full horror was evident from its first page, in which the Greek authorities committed to agree to everything the creditors demanded, with no reciprocal commitment from the troika to agree on anything in return – a pledge of utter subservience”.

While I do not concur with Paul Mason’s assessment of this as ‘one of the greatest political memoirs of all time’, I do think this is an important book. It is a long read – 560 pages – but worth the time and effort to read it. At times, he gets the plot exactly right: “Austerity is a morality play pressed into the service of legitimizing cynical wealth transfers from the have-nots to the haves during times of crisis”. Yet he more often loses the plot in a failure to understand the role of personality in history. His hubris blinds him to the bigger picture. If it were not so, it might then be one of the greatest political memoirs of all time.