

To the Crucible II:

A Further Irish Engagement with the Greek Crisis and the Greek Left

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This is a sequel to <http://www.irishleftreview.org/2013/01/21/crucible-irish-engagement-greek-crisis-greek-left/>

The Dominant Narrative

“Things have gone very quiet in Greece, haven’t they?” So many people said that to me in the past six months or so. I responded that there was a lot going on, even if international media weren’t covering it. There were civil mobilisations of teachers and transport workers, as well as rising unemployment, emigration and impoverishment, being met with continuing protest, strikes, occupations. Even so, I sensed a lull in the rhythm of resistance, since the big demonstrations opposing the passage of the third memorandum last autumn. Obviously people couldn’t keep going at that pitch all the time, but how many were succumbing to exhaustion, despair, defeat? How many were quietly going about their work in solidarity networks, policy development, political education?

The story circulating in May, promoted by its government, was that Greece had stabilised and protest had subsided. Grexit had given way to Grecovery. Antonis Samaras, who was most actively articulating this, touring the world with the good news, even heralded a Greek ‘renaissance’. The feeblest of economic indicators were offered as evidence, although international commentators, even ones who wanted to believe this story, found it hard to get past the fact that most indicators

still pointed in the opposite direction. In other statements, Samaras conceded that they hadn't really changed the numbers yet, but insisted that they had eliminated the 'negative psychology'.

Many Greeks were scathing, pointing out that tiny shifts from rating agencies and bond yields paled into insignificance aside the continuing freefall of the economy and the still deteriorating conditions of life for non-oligarchic Greeks. Among indicators being trumpeted were lower wages, which might be good news for investors, but hardly for workers. Yanis Varoufakis labelled the Greek success story as the 'latest Orwellian turn of the Greek crisis' and laid the economic facts on the line'. <http://yanisvaroufakis.eu/2013/05/22/greek-success-story-the-latest-orwellian-turn-of-the-greek-crisis/>

At this point Ireland came into the story. Enda Kenny arrived in Athens on 23 May 2013. On the basis of a few hours in Athens and conversations with Samaras, he endorsed the Greek 'success story' and praised Samaras for changing international sentiment toward Greece. Samaras declared that Greece was following Ireland's example to exit the crisis and to return to the markets next year. This 'return to the markets' is presented as the great utopian aspiration of our time. In Ireland we are told that we are set to enter that promised land soon. So all that evolutionary striving was for this.



Enda Kenny and Antonis Samaras in Athens, Vangelis Papavasileiou cartoon in Eleftherotipia

At the press conference of the two prime ministers, Samaras said 'Ireland has shown us the way back to growth and to the markets'. For the Greek elite, Ireland was a model during the boom and it remains so in the bust. Kenny soaked up the flattery and smugly advised Samaras that the secret of our 'success' was to establish 'trust' with the troika. RTE news opened the item with images of the Acropolis and the ceremonial changing of the guards at the Greek parliament. It was all reported without a hint of scepticism, regarding both Irish and Greek 'success' as somehow self-evident. They did not see fit to mention statements by Syriza or KKE calling attention to Ireland's debt, emigration, cuts, all on the road of advancing oligarchic interests at great social cost to the rest of the population. It was not considered newsworthy to note that the Greek left did not see Ireland as a model for Greece. Even beyond the left, there would be many voices in both Ireland and Greece

who would query whether either Ireland or Greece is a success story. Tony Connelly, RTE correspondent in Athens during the Kenny-Samaras visit, nevertheless parroted the preferred narrative of the plutocracy.

Return to Athens

A counter-narrative was in order. I had been following events, but had some questions to answer to clarify my sense of where the story was now. Could it be that the time of possibility for the left had passed? Despite the reality that all problems persisted, even intensified, were the powers-that-be prevailing after all? Could this be one more chapter in the tragic history of the Greek left, who have been so strong, who have fought so fiercely, but always been bitterly defeated?

While I kept up as best I could from afar, there is nothing like walking the streets and talking face-to-face to take the pulse of the scene. I returned to Greece in June and spent 15 days, primarily in Athens, to find out what was happening. I met people I had met previously to hear how their lives and thoughts had moved on and I met new people too.

I was with my son Cathal this time, who was discovering Athens for the first time. We walked the streets, ancient and modern. In the ancient ruins with wifi hotspots, I tweeted my fascination with the ways classical culture resonates in the present conjuncture. Not that you can say much in a tweet, but my brain was buzzing with the philosophical discourses that had captured my imagination so long ago. Cathal was better on the historical detail, but I was again reflecting on the relationship of the big philosophical ideas to the socio-historical forces of the times.



Athens in June 2013: Helena and the daily papers, boy singing Theodorakis, Helena in the agora, Cathal by the sea

I was also struck by the strength of ancient myth in the contemporary detective novels I was reading. The Alex Mavros novels trace missing persons through the layers of Greek society, from the oligarchs to the communists, in the last decade with storylines reaching back into the political history of the previous decades and even further back to myths of Demeter and Persephone, Hercules and Cerberus. Near the agora, I noted the street in Monastiraki where the detective lived and the street where his communist sidekick ran a café. The author, Paul Johnston, now a facebook friend, suggested that I might drop down to the Peloponnese while I was in Greece. Another time I'll do that. Meanwhile, I'm hoping that he will get on with writing the next one and that someone will translate the crisis trilogy of Petros Markaris, because I've now read all the Alex Mavros and Costas Haritos novels currently available. I learn a lot about Greece from such fiction too.

Walking from Metaxourgio to Monastiraki on the first day, we stopped near Omonia to look at a poster for the Alter Summit, which we would be attending. A man stopped to look at us looking and drew us into conversation. He said that politics is hopeless, that it is all about power and money, that it would never change. He was active in left politics when he was young, he disclosed, but he was now 63 and no longer a student and could see no point in it. I told him that I was older than 63 and still active in left politics. He looked at me quizzically. Afterwards, I thought that I should have pointed to Manolis Glezos, Syriza MP, who is still full of fire and hope at 91.

We proceeded down Athinas and took in all the sights and smells of meat and fish, both raw and cooked, and noted all the goods on display hanging in the fronts of shops. Many were the sort of clothes and accessories you might find anywhere, but what was distinctive here was all the different sorts of gas masks on display. Should we buy them? The last time I was in Athens, people asked me if I had a gas mask when I showed up for protests and lent me one when needed. On balance, though, I didn't expect to need one this time. I didn't think that the European left march into Syntagma would be gassed.

We walked many streets, particularly around Metaxourgio, Psiri, Omonia and Exarchia. Cathal went for shortcuts and back streets, often at night, which didn't always look as dangerous as they actually were. These was normal life continuing somehow in shops, apartments and offices, but also degrees of desperation apparent in the begging, scavenging, shooting up, wandering homelessly, even crying and crawling. Some things were puzzling, for example, coming across a pile of abandoned clothes that looked like a person had undressed there and walked away. So many sights on the streets made me wonder what story was behind what I was seeing.



Cathal overlooking Athens from Metaxourgio, a street in Psiri, Helena in Omonia

Even those who looked prosperous had their problems and were not so prosperous as they seemed. I spoke to a number of people in employment, in several cases people with PhDs working as lecturers or journalists, who had not been paid in many months. How did they live? From the pay of others in their families who were being paid. In most cases, those being paid had their pay drastically reduced. I met one woman, a well groomed middle aged woman, who broke into floods of tears, because no one in her family was working now and they had nothing. Another young woman, articulate and attractive, told me that her life was over and she was only fighting now for a better society for her son. She had been a physiotherapist and then a waitress and was now

unemployed. So many people serving in hotels and restaurants were once physiotherapists or journalists or teachers or graphic designers. I met one young man, who did a master's thesis on the EU, who told me that he wished that he could have it back and write the exact opposite now.

An essential port of call was the Syriza head office. We chatted to Costas Isychos, Dimitra Tsami and Yiannis Bournous on many topics, from expectations of the Alter Summit to protests in Turkey to the breakup of the ULA to preparations for the Syriza congress.

Alter Summit

We met again over the next days at the Alter Summit. It took place at the Olympic village on 7-8 June. Most sessions were in or around the velodrome. Outside were stalls where various parties, projects and groups displayed their wares - books, bags, pamphlets, posters, pens, t-shirts. For meals, there were pop-up kitchens offering various ethnic cuisines on paper plates. The system for paying for food and drink reminded me of the USSR. Queuing for chits and queuing again for products was not one of the most attractive aspects of these experiments in socialism (a controversial conceptualisation, I know). There was an attractive atmosphere for milling around and chatting in the sun, until the second day, when it rained.

People from various parties, movements, trade unions came together to explore grounds for shared analysis and activity. It was a convergence of forces from the European Social Forum, the parties within the Party of the European Left (Die Linke, Syriza, Izquierda Unida, Front de Gauche, etc) and major European trade unions. The six Irish people attending it were from diverse sections of the left: Paul Murphy MEP of the Socialist Party, Mark Malone of the Workers Solidarity Movement, John Bissett of Spectacle of Defiance, Cathal Ó Murchú of Sinn Féin, Sarah Brennan of Debt Action Coalition (and a former student of mine) and myself of Left Forum. A trotskyst, an anarchist, a shinner, a eurocommunist and hard to label - all interacted harmoniously - although Paul Murphy came and went quickly, so as to join in the action on Taksim Square. Not that we always agreed. At one point, John said to me "Žižek is very good on Greece, isn't he?" and I launched into a tirade about how incoherent and irresponsible he is. Another night, Cathal and Mark talked long into the night over many beers in Exarchia Square exploring the differences in their political philosophies.

At the Alter Summit, proceedings began with a feminist assembly, which concentrated on the effects of the crisis on women. There followed 15 thematic assemblies over two days on education, debt, health, migration, housing, employment, welfare, environment, commons, fascism, economic policy, international relations. The emphasis was on proposals for common international initiatives.



Alter Summit: Helena on day 1, Haris Golemis at plenary, Mark Malone, Helena Sheehan and John Bissett on day 2

In the evening of the first day, there was a plenary. As a thousand people assembled, there was rousing Greek political music creating an energetic and expectant atmosphere. Then the manifesto was launched. It had been drafted over many months by activists in many countries. It began: *“Europe stands on the edge of a precipice, looking into the abyss. Austerity policies drive the people of Europe into poverty, undercut democracy and dismantle social policies. Rising inequalities endanger social cohesion. Ecological destruction is worsening while acute humanitarian crises devastate the most affected countries. Women and young people are hardest hit.”* You can read the whole text at <http://www.socialistproject.ca/bullet/835.php> and see the launch of it at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=H2dEsbSbByE>

There followed hours of speakers from many countries, movements and unions, all saying more or less the same thing: how objectionable and oppressive neo-liberalism was and how we needed to combat it together. There were some multimedia intervals on various struggles and sometimes groups burst into song. It was great to be there with so much harmony of analysis and commitment to common action, but as the hours went on, the energy of it dissipated, as it was repetitious and exhausting. The Irish were tired and hungry and it was approaching 11pm. On the metro, we agreed that such repetition should be banned. When we settled into a café in Metaxourgio, someone said “Sorry, what exactly is wrong with neo-liberalism?” and we all wearily laughed. Unfortunately, we missed the speech of Alexis Tsipras, the finale and the concert that was to follow.

We were up bright and early and back the next day, participating in assemblies, making contacts, conversing informally. I spent a lot of time talking to Greeks. In search of a hard to find session in the swimming area, I asked a man “Are you Greek?” to which he responded “Are you Helena?” It was Yiannis Tolios, an economist of the left platform and on central committee of Syriza, and we had a long talk after that session. We covered many aspects of politics in Greece and Ireland as well as episodes in our back stories, discovering that we had both studied in the USSR. Costas Isychos came up to talk with us and said “Her life is like a Hollywood movie”.

In the evening we took the metro into the centre of Athens, where the participants reassembled to march from the National Archeological Museum into Syntagma Square. It was a lively and colourful march with street theatre and with singing and chanting in many languages and styles.



Alter Summit march to Syntagma Square

Overall, I found the experience of the Alter Summit a bit underwhelming, although I wasn't altogether sure why. I assumed that it was because I hadn't been part of the whole process leading to it and didn't participate appropriately. However, others found it a bit disappointing too, as attendance from abroad was not what expected and attendance from Greece, despite posters all over town, was far less than hoped. This was put down to a sense of downturn on the Greek left. Nevertheless, it did strengthen the bonds between the different sections of the European left and built networks for ongoing practical initiatives.

In the days after it, the Irish people coming and going were discovering other delights and difficulties of Athens. John, Mark and Cathal climbed the Acropolis in the heat of the summer sun, while I strode in the shade of the National Gardens. In the various cafés, where we met to compare notes at intervals, we were interrupted as usual with a stream people begging, selling, performing. It was impossible to deal with all of them. However, one young boy with a toy ukulele, who sang Theodorakis songs, won us over completely and we reached into our pockets.

Life Stories: Next Episodes

What had been happening in the lives of those I met when I was last in Athens? Although I had remained in contact with some of them, there was nothing like a few hours face-to-face in a café to find out how their lives were moving on. Unfortunately there wasn't much good news. Aristides Baltas was in hospital, although I did get regular health reports and prospects of recovery were looking up by the time I left.

I met my contact in the KKE for another long talk. As well as having no hope of secure employment commensurate with his high qualifications and receiving no pay for six months from his insecure employment, he has had his political troubles as well. There was a move to expel him from the party on the grounds that he gave an academic lecture in a space occupied by anarchists 'enemies of our party'. People he had known all his life, some even members of the same family, debated and voted on this in his branch. In the end, they decided to censure, but not to expel, him. He felt politically disarmed and depressed. He said that the discussions coming up to the party congress were very rich, although decisions were unanimous. I had heard from others that this happened by controlling elections of delegates, even expelling critics, so this story fit the pattern. The primary

point of controversy was the question of alliances. Before the congress, there was an inconsistency, he argued, between the party programme and its political practice on this question. Now the inconsistency was resolved, but in the wrong direction. They are still denouncing Syriza and others on the left and refusing to discuss alliances.

As to Damian Mac Con Uladh, when I was last in Athens he was working as a journalist not being paid by *Athens News*. Now he was working and not being paid by *Eleftherotypia*. He works on *Enet English*, which has become one of my daily sources for keeping up with Greek news. *Athens News* had ceased to publish, as its publisher, Petros Kyriakides, under indictment for embezzlement, escaped Greece, dressed as an orthodox priest, leaving debts and unpaid wages, but with perhaps €80 million in his possession as he fled. We discussed many stories that Damian had chased or broken, including his April 1st story on the troika targeting the Greek alphabet as too costly. I raised the question of whether Syriza's moment has passed. He didn't think so, but he thought that the downward spiral was such that, by the time they got the chance, they could be in charge of ruins.

We spent many evenings in Exarchia. The other Irish people in town were impressed by the lively atmosphere in Exarchia Square. One night it was packed with people watching a film projected on a sheet strung across a clothes line. Left posters were on display, although the mural proclaiming "Our Streets" was gone and had been replaced by a new taverna with almost no customers. We had dinner on several occasions in Achilleos, my favourite taverna there. Cannabis wafted in the air. According to Cathal's guidebook: "Exarchia may seem a little worn around the edges, but this is the place for all your liberal intellectual café sipping needs." This doesn't really capture it. I have had some good left (not liberal) café conversations there, there is a rougher side to it, not covered by 'a little worn around the edges'. I'm long past being impressed by the strut of black block macho. A smoke bomb, the kind they hurl at riot police, exploded near us one night.



Irish in Athens: Pat McCusker with Cathal at KKE, Cathal, Sarah, Mark and John in Monastiraki, John, Cathal and Mark in Exarchia

In contrast, we also explored the southwestern suburbs by the sea, where city dwellers who can't get to the islands go to swim in water, which might look clean and clear, but scientific tests indicate otherwise. It's also where stadia built for the Olympics are rotting. It's also one of the areas where rich Greeks live. Looking at the map, it seems obscene how much space is taken up by Glyfada Golf Club.

Calm before the storm?

My intensive discussions of Greek politics continued. Everyone was scathing about the Greek 'success story' narrative. Everyone admitted to a recession of resistance. No one thought it was more than a temporary lull. Too many people had too many problems for the status quo to hold. Whether Syriza was the answer to those problems was a question that met with various responses. Whether Syriza would get the chance and if they would use it to initiate a radical transformation of the society was also a matter of contention. On the issue of the social democratisation of Syriza, the danger that Syriza would become the new Pasok, including the comparison of Alexis Tsipras to Andreas Papandreou, I got a whole range of responses, even from within Syriza. Some brushed it off, dismissing it as the ultra left never being able to get real or to cope with proximity of power. Others admitted to worry about it, but argued that there is no space for a social democratic solution to the problems of Greece. Others, and not only left activists, but others I met in casual conversations on the street, in hotels or cafés or at demonstrations, put it more strongly, pointing to compromising positions taken by Alexis Tsipras, especially when abroad, and by those around him speaking to the media in Greece.

Particularly searching conversations on these issues flowed during meetings with political scientists at University of Athens, Michalis Spourdalakis and his colleagues, Costas Eleftheriou and Chrisanthos Tassis, and with researchers at Nikos Poulantzas Institute, Haris Golemis, its director, and colleagues Theodora Kotsaka and Vagia Lysikatoú. All spoke as political persons, not as detached academics. Many of the controversies coming up to the party congress came into the conversations, as did the changing nature of the party and its relation to the ever changing wider movement. I was impressed by the seriousness of analysis of forces in motion and determination to chart a new path for Greek society and for the international left. At NPI we also discussed the possibility of our Left Forum affiliating to the Transform network.

The Storm: ERT

The situation is so volatile in Greece that changes can come very quickly and you never know what the day might bring. Tuesday 11 June 2013 was such a day. During the previous week, so many conversations had probed the withdrawal from the streets, the lull in the movement, but always indicating that it was the calm before the storm, that anything could happen. That very day we had such a conversation. Yet by afternoon, a storm had broken. Something utterly unexpected had happened.

When I saw the first announcements of the closure of the public broadcasting service by midnight, I found it hard to absorb. The first tweet seemed like a chimera, but then the twitter stream was full of it. I turned on the tv, where the station was covering its own closure, first with disbelief and then with defiance. It was a non-stop stream of denunciation of the government and the troika, whether talking heads in studio or politicians speaking to the crowd gathering outside the station. Alexis Tsipras, Manolis Glezos and other Syriza MPs were breathing fire. The government was making this momentous move by ministerial decree without reference to parliament or even cabinet. Two of the three government parties were not supporting it. Only Golden Dawn supported New

Democracy, because they were not happy with their treatment by the station. The troika had decreed that 2000 public sector jobs were to go by July and this was a way of doing that in one fell swoop with hundreds more to count to traunche to be axed. It was so reckless and destructive. People I met kept calling it a 'coup d'etat'.

There was call to come to the ERT station at Agia Paraskevi on the outskirts of Athens at 7pm. At that point, we thought that we were going to a protest, although I realised that it would be a long night. I thought that the riot police would come in at midnight and forcibly close down the station. It was a balmy summer evening and people were steaming through the gates to join others were waving flags, listening to speeches, talking to friends. There were thousands eventually. I was very moved by the singing of some of my favourite Theodorakis songs. One moment I would be on my feet with my fist clenched singing the phrases of the songs I knew and thinking in a world historical way of how beautiful and tragic it was. The next moment I would be sitting on the grass in my summer dress and sandals and wishing for one of the gas masks that I didn't buy or wondering how long I could go without sleeping or charging my phone. Later I ran into Lila Mambregianni, who told me she had everything in her bag that I might need – malox, crackers, water, umbrellas, gas masks, etc. As the darkness fell, there was more apprehension about what was going to happen at midnight. Around 10pm, word went around that the transmitters were going down all over Greece and by 11:15 ERT was off air in Athens too. So midnight was something of an anti-climax.



ERT: protest, occupation, public broadcasting, worker's control

The protest turned into an occupation. New territory was being charted now. The journalists and other employees of ERT decided to keep broadcasting. Various internet sites carried the broadcasts. The European Broadcasting Union gave its moral and technical support. The KKE gave over the frequency of its tv service to ERT for long periods. One remarkable feature of this occupation was that the KKE / PAME stood in the same space as Syriza, Antarsya, anarchists and other leftists, offering hope of a more co-operative relationship between these forces. Theodora Oikonomides @IrateGreek tweeted "Is *The Life of Brian* over?" I hoped so.

After a while, primarily to answer the call of nature, I found my way inside the station. There I discovered that many people as well as ERT employees were in there, including Syriza MPs, who were on a rota to be sure that there were at least 20 of them there at any given time. I spoke to many people about why they were occupying the station. Some of those who were its sharpest critics were

now its fierce defenders. They knew it was stuffed with political appointees and gave government too easy a ride, but they were defending public broadcasting as it could be.

Public broadcasting as it could be is what it became during these days. It has been riveting television at times: splendid music, political satire, alternative documentaries, talking heads telling the truth about the government and the troika, even about the pressures on ERT that made it other than what it should have been, as well as constant coverage of the occupation itself. The scene outside was like a festival at times. There were memorable moments when people who gathered waved their flags, danced, clenched their fists, sang traditional songs of the Greek left, enacting a continuity of struggles of past and present, evoking memory of so much that had been won and lost, stirring hope of taking back the world being taken away from us. The continuing broadcasts on ERT have been true public service broadcasting, a sustained expression of democracy, as well as a political humiliation of the government.



General strike in protest at closure of ERT

As I was frequently updating on the social networks, I began receiving calls from requests to do media interviews in Ireland. In the early hours of the morning, exhausted, but still not wanting to leave, I decided to return to the hotel to charge my phone and to do the interview for Morning Ireland on RTE by land line. I emphasised that ERT was the equivalent of RTE and tried to get the audience to imagine what it meant in that way. I said that I often felt that RTE spoke with the voice of the masters of the universe, but would come to defend it if there was such a move against it. Indeed I would be delighted to see RTE do the sort of broadcasting that was being done on ERT now.

I was pleased at the response of some journalists in Ireland, who wanted to organise a solidarity demonstration at the Greek embassy in Dublin. Emma O'Kelly of the NUJ broadcasting branch asked me to get them a direct contact with ERT journalists. When I made my way back to ERT, I was tempted to lie on the grass with the thousand others listening to speeches and songs, but I made my way to the newsroom to make that contact. While there, they asked me to go on tv while I was there. I agreed to do that. I spoke of the sudden and shocking closure of ERT in a wider context, situating the immediate events within longer trajectories, seeing the closure of this public broadcaster within a larger and longer dismantling of the public dimension of everything, even an erosion of a public service ethos within the public service. I did four broadcasts that day, later

adding interviews on Newstalk and Late Debate, all after a night of no sleep, but obviously running on adrenalin and a power monkey attached to my iphone. Damian arrived on the scene during the day to cover the story for the *Irish Times*.

During the afternoon, it lashed rain, putting a damper on the atmosphere outside the station. Nevertheless, many stayed out there under umbrellas, while many more streamed inside the station. One man started screaming about the lack of organisation and security. Although it was crowded and potentially dangerous, it was a remarkably harmonious self-organised community. People stood around a grand piano and sang songs, including *Imagine*. They sat around and told their stories and shared their food.

There were rumours of the government falling and a new election happening soon. The date of 14 July was doing the rounds. There was a lot going on in parliament and government buildings too on the day. At night I returned to the hotel to power up again, both my devices with the electric current and myself with some sleep. I turned on the tv to channel one, where the screen went black the night before and was shocked to see ERT there and then 902, the communist channel, and then the colour card. It was surreal at times.

The third day was a general strike, which was called to protest the closure of ERT. On the way back to Agia Paraskevi, it was hard to gauge how many shops were closed for the general strike, because so many shops have closed down in Athens anyway. So many thousand arrived for the rally at ERT that it was impossible to get into the grounds of the station at first. We were with the crowds that filled the street. I met Kostas Skordoulis and Costas Kefalis and we went to a café for a catch up chat. Later we got into the grounds and milled around for some hours listening to the music and speeches and occupying the space.

An Island Interval

With so much happening in Athens, I was tempted to cancel our plans for a weekend trip to Evia. However, I had arranged to visit friends I hadn't seen in many years. Moreover, it might be good to see how it all looked from there and perhaps to unwind a bit. I was getting a bit old for the barricades. We arrived in the village of Politika, where explored the island, probed its politics, swam in the sea, sampled its tavernas. We caught up with Mario and Marta Bunge, both emeritus professors, Mario of philosophy and Marta of mathematics. Mario and I had a flourishing correspondence about philosophy and politics in the early 1980s, when we could explore areas of agreement and disagreement in a way that was no longer possible in 2013, when his attacks on marxism and my defence of it were going nowhere, except to make Marta and Cathal uneasy. Much more fruitful was asking questions about Argentina and their views on the Perons and Kirchners. Marta was enthusiastic about 'Evita' and 'Cristina'. Mario was writing his memoirs and focused on Argentina in the 1950s.



Evia: Cathal in Limni, Mario and Marta Bunge in Politika, Politika graffiti, Loutra Edipsos, Helena in Chalkida

On our final night in Evia, we attended a Syriza rally in Chalkida. This town, where Aristotle died, was alive people chatting in the cafés and walking along the promenade by the sea. There was an information kiosk there about the occupied building materials factory in Thessaloniki. On the main square, Syriza was showing ERT on a big screen as a protest against its closure. Much of the broadcast was the concert taking place at Agia Paraskevi. We mixed with Syriza activists and discovered that Syriza came first here in elections in May and June last year on 19% and then 29%. Evia has 6 MPs in parliament: 1 Syriza, 1 KKE, 1 Dimar, 1 Pasok, 1 ND, 1 XA (Golden Dawn). Syriza have 500 members on the island.



Syriza rally in Evia: Marielena Siolia translating for Cathal, Helena with Syriza activists setting up for ERT protest

Last Night in Athens

For our final night in Greece, we returned to Athens to attend a Syriza rally in Syntagma Square. I ran into Mary Fitzgerald of the *Irish Times*, who was in Athens for a conference and we went to a café for a quick catch up chat. After that, I found the crowd too dense to find anyone I knew. There was a big stage and screen. There were lots of colourful banners. The music ranged from operatic choruses to national and international protest songs. "Which side are you on?" was one. The high point was a speech by Alexis Tsipras, somewhat in pre-election mode, bidding Samras "Kali nichta", as it still seemed as if the government could fall and a new election would come soon.



Syriza in Athens: on Alter Summit march, at ERT occupation, at Syntagma rally

That night the news came that a court ruling had ordered that ERT transmissions be restored, pending restructuring, an order that the government has not implemented. It has been astonishing to see how this class, which has made the laws and dominated such institutions, has blatantly defied them and gone for naked authoritarian rule instead. It was the same when a court ruled substantial sections of the third memorandum unconstitutional and they implemented them regardlessly.

After 15 days, so intense and eventful as to seem much longer, it was time to go. In the weeks that followed, I checked out ERT transmissions several times every day and did my best to remind people, especially journalists, that the struggle was still ongoing, even though it fell off the international news agenda.

IAMCR in Dublin

I had to hit the ground running as soon as I arrived back in Dublin, as I was scheduled to speak at the conference of the International Association for Media and Communication Research in Dublin. It was a big conference with 1500 presenting at many parallel sessions. I was to speak at a special session called "The Eye of the Storm". It was to focus on the framing of the crisis in the PIIGS countries. I was asked to do a comparative analysis of Ireland and Greece. In the briefing notes for the session, Paschal Preston, asked for the crisis to be addressed by 'situated intellectuals', although he didn't necessarily mean occupying a tv station. My paper was called "The compliant and the defiant: dominant v dissident narratives of the crisis in Ireland and Greece". Sophia Kaitizaki-Whitlock from Thessaloniki was also speaking at this session and laid out a chronology of the crisis in Greece.

I outlined how the crisis had been framed in Ireland and in Greece in the dominant discourse, which has cast Ireland as the compliant and Greece as the defiant. It has suited the troika to showcase Ireland as the good debtor, as meeting its targets and blazing the trail of 'reform', the code word for lowering wages, raising taxes, downsizing the public sector, paying private debts from public resources, and doing so without protest or disruption. It has also suited them to point to Greece as the bad debtor, where everything got worse when they failed to meet their targets and were beset by protests and strikes and moreover had the threat of a left government in the shadows.

The lesson: Greeks protest and all gets worse; Irish don't and all gets better. Now Greece has seen the light and is following Ireland to exit the crisis.

The problem is that it's not true, not in Ireland, not in Greece, and on so many levels. For one thing, I have reached boiling point at the constant reiteration of the idea that Irish people don't protest. It is epitomised in this *Irish Independent* ad campaign. It shows Syntagma Square full of protesters and the GPO empty.



However, there are days when Syntagma Square is empty of protesters and days when the GPO is the site of protests. Irish people do protest. It is hard enough to be involved in constant protest, which is admittedly not so massive or effective as in Greece, without having it discursively obliterated. I gave some indication of forms and levels of protest since the start of the crisis. There is hardly a day without protest of one sort or another. Some are small, but some bring out tens of thousands. There were 100,000 at the GPO in 2010. Our general election in 2011 saw the greatest overturning of Dail Eireann in its history and a significant rise in representation of the left. The government formed by Fine Gael and Labour, parties which excoriated the previous government from opposition benches, proceeded to implement the same policies and could not have been more compliant with troika demands. In the same year, the occupy movement saw occupations on every city on this island, with many expressing their disdain for successive governments and the whole international financial system. The RTE phone-in show *Liveline* seethes with rage as citizens tell their stories of their lives laid waste in this crisis. Public sector workers overturned the recommendation of their unions in a 'deal' cutting their wages and downgrading their conditions, although they subsequently accepted out of fear a revised version of this. High numbers have refused to pay new taxes, either because they couldn't pay or resented that our taxes were going to pay bondholders, while cutting our health, education and welfare services. We do protest. We do resist.

Moreover, Ireland is not a success story, unless you are of the class whose interests are served by lower wages and pensions, by privatisation of public property, by subordination of the state to the market, etc. Nor is Greece by following this road.

So who are the compliant and who are the defiant? I argued that it is not the case that Ireland is the compliant and Greece is the defiant. The governments of Ireland and Greece, all who vote for them, all who fail to protest against them, are the compliant. Those who rise up against them in Ireland and Greece are the defiant.

Since that press conference in Athens, so much has already changed. The story of political stability, of containing dissent through civil mobilisation, of a feel good message defusing the 'negative psychology', claiming to turn the defiant into the compliant, this story has crumbled in the face of the ERT crisis. That very day when speaking of a lull in the movement, of calm before the storm, saw the storm break and the movement in high tide again.

For the right and centre, Ireland is a model for Greece. For the left, Greece is a model for Ireland. Of course, it's matter of which Ireland and which Greece.

Syriza Congress

Although I was invited to attend the Syriza congress in Athens, I couldn't do so. I followed it from Dublin as best I could and spoke to Syriza activists about it both before and after it. I have also noted such response as there has been to it among the international left, much of which has been divided between those who want to believe in Syriza no matter what and those who are too ready to write them off as reformists who have moved to the right and defeated their internal left.

The congress consolidated the transition from a coalition to a unified party. Membership is now around 35,000, who were represented by nearly 3500 delegates to the congress from 10 to 14 July. Membership is now individual. Many members now were never a part of any of the components of the previous coalition. At the congress, there was controversy about if and when all components should disband. Synaspismos, by far the largest, with 10,000 members, had dissolved itself just before the congress, but several smaller ones were reluctant to do so. The most powerful voice against dissolution at the congress was Manolis Glezos, a heroic figure of the Greek left, who argued for continuing diversity and against being a 'party of applauders'.



Syriza congress: Alexis Tsipras, Manolis Glezos

There were other procedural issues surrounding the methods of electing the party leader and central committee. At issue was a tension between a mass party dominated by a charismatic leader and a small group around him, who could be flexible about policy, with a more passive

membership, and one with stronger collective accountability and active membership. There were also debates and divided votes on amendments regarding leaving the eurozone, cancelling the debt and considering alliances to the left or right.

While components may dissolve, platforms won't. The most powerful is the left platform, which got 30% of the vote in elections for the central committee and up to 40% in some votes on amendments. Some international commentators have decided that 'mainstream' Syriza is 'reformist' and has moved to the right and cracked down on its internal left. I do not see it this way. I have strong relationships with both left platform and 'mainstream' Syriza. I have great respect for people on both sides. I don't believe that the left is confined to the left platform. A party of this size is necessarily diverse and holds ideological positions along a certain left spectrum. All of us looking at it have our own ideological positions and affinities to those closest to our own positions. My strongest ties are to ex-Synaspismos and to a position that stems from the tradition of left eurocommunism. These ties cross the mainstream / left platform divide.

There are real tensions as well as some caricatures and not only among those viewing it from afar. There is real worry about a social democratisation of Syriza, about a tendency to be too willing to bend to be acceptable international centres of power and to wider sections of voters. There is an accusation of wanting to be in government at any cost. On the other hand, there are demands to 'get real' and accusations that some would rather not be in government than to compromise their radicalism. Yes, there are people in Syriza and outside it commenting on it that do conform to these types, but most active members of Syriza that I know are serious about finding a viable path to exit crisis and to transform society in a really radical way. They see that capitalism is the problem and that socialism is the answer. They want to organise systematic political education, which Syriza now lacks, so as to have a critical and active membership. However, unlike those who call themselves revolutionaries and denounce reformists, they have stopped dreaming of storming the winter palace and bolshevising the 21st century. They are not holding out for an all encompassing insurrection, which will destroy capitalism one day and inaugurate socialism the next day. They are planning for a protracted process, which will include winning multi-party elections, perhaps entering into difficult alliances, undoing damage done, building the new in the shell of the old.

On alliances, the preference is for alliances to the left, but Antarsya lack numbers and KKE rebuff all overtures. If only it were otherwise. So what is to be done? Suppose Syriza win the next election on 28% or even 30%. Even with the 50 bonus seats, where will they get the numbers to form a left government? As undesirable as it might be, should making up numbers with elements from Dimar or Pasok not even be discussed? Or should Syriza roll over and let ND form another government to wreak further disaster?

I admit to having my worries about Syriza becoming the new Pasok. I have seen parties and movements I fervently supported blatantly betray the hopes and needs of those who put them in power. I have seen it particularly closely with the ANC. Some speeches of Tsipras do seem too compromising. Some acts, such as speaking at an event to honour conservative prime minister

Konstantinos Karamanlis, seem too ingratiating to the right. In his last appearance with Žižek in May in Zagreb, Tsipras took no issue with Žižek lurching from right to ultra-left, inciting Syriza to manage capitalism better than capitalists as far into the future as we can see and then making his ill-judged and much-quoted recommendation of the gulag for those who failed to support Syriza. There are other instances I could cite.

However, I don't think that anything I have seen or heard so far constitutes decisive evidence of a social-democratisation of Syriza. I still think that they are the best hope for Greece and the European left.

ERT carries on

Meanwhile, the government didn't fall, but was re-formed after Dimar left. A number of politicians who failed to be elected are now cabinet ministers. A channel called DT has appeared to hold the place of ERT until one called NERIT is launched. It runs old dramas and documentaries. One film maker has announced that he would sue for bringing his work into disrepute on this 'despicable channel'. ERT workers have been offered the prospect of short contracts at reduced wages, which they have rejected. ERT carries on broadcasting. I check it out several times every day and particularly enjoy the concerts on the steps of the ERT studios in Agia Paraskevi at night. The whole operation is more organised now than in those first shocking and frenetic days. Whatever happens next, it will go down in history as a formidable example of workers' control of the means of production and true public broadcasting with broad democratic participation.

Conclusion (for now)

I had other plans for these past 15 months, but Greece has forced itself into the centre of my focus in a way that I couldn't escape. It is at the cutting edge of both the crisis and the alternative. Greece is nearer to the eye of the storm, but the same winds are blowing on us all. The devastation wreaked there is so much greater, but the defences are also stronger. It might also be where a rainbow appears.

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Subsequently, this article became part of a larger narrative and analysis published in a book entitled [*The Syriza Wave*](#) (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2017)

