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## The Greek people were willing to fight



Sources: Jacobin

*Ten years ago protests against eu austerity policies shook Greece. Although the movement had the virtue of mobilizing citizens who were not part of the organized left, its lack of political orientation ended up leading to defeat.*

The "hot spring" of 2011 was just a drop in the huge wave of popular uprisings that swept the world that year. The wave began to form on the southern coast of the Mediterranean with the [Tunisian Revolution](#) and the Tahrir Square revolts. She then arrived in Spain hand in hand with the [indignados](#) and traveled, through Greece, to the United States,

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where she was received by the Occupy Wall Street movement, before returning to the Mediterranean for the occupation of Istanbul's Taksim Gezi Park.

In addition to being part of this international revolt, the occupation of the squares that brought hundreds of thousands of Greeks to the streets must be analyzed within the framework of the national cycle of mobilizations, which had begun to shake the country in May 2010, when the parliament approved the first [memorandum](#) with Athens' European creditors. The occupation of the squares was left behind, but the wave expanded and took different forms until the summer of 2015.

Although there were many differences between the various uprisings, the Greek movement shared certain traits with its foreign counterparts, especially those in the Mediterranean. All were surprisingly massive, their social composition was transclassist, young students played a prominent role and managed to arouse popular sympathy. In addition, they shared a wide repertoire of actions, mainly focused on the occupation of public space.

No less remarkable were the subjective similarities of these movements. Breaking with organizational frameworks and traditional political splits, they emphasized self-organization and combined social demands with the search for forms of direct or participatory democracy. The ubiquitous presence of national flags and the distance taken from the historical and symbolic references of the left, brought to light the "national" character of the mobilizations. Even so, the development of different forms of solidarity and the transnational circulation of symbols, slogans and modes of action must be conceived as a renewed form of internationalism.

Todo esto para decir que comprender la experiencia griega nos permitirá extraer algunas conclusiones generales sobre la paradoja que definió a estos movimientos, a saber, la divergencia entre su dimensión insurreccional masiva y el limitado impacto político que tuvieron. Para decirlo en pocas palabras, fueron incapaces de lograr conquistas duraderas que estuvieran a la altura de los objetivos que se habían propuesto.

### **Crisis orgánica**

Un punto de partida útil para comprender las razones profundas que llevaron a esta situación es el concepto de «crisis orgánica», elaborado por Antonio Gramsci en sus *Cuadernos de la cárcel*.

El concepto de «crisis orgánica» remite a una ruptura radical y repentina de las relaciones entre las clases sociales y las fuerzas políticas que hasta entonces cumplían funciones representativas. Es una forma específica de crisis política, típica de un régimen parlamentario en el que un sistema institucional ampliado y pluralista organiza los términos del consentimiento de las clases subalternas a la dominación burguesa.

La estabilidad de este sistema hegemónico se viene abajo —de aquí el carácter «orgánico» de la crisis— como resultado de la presión que ejercen dos factores fundamentales. El primero es el fracaso de un proyecto estratégico de la clase dominante, como una guerra o un asunto de importancia nacional. El segundo es el pasaje repentino de las masas de un estado pasivo a una actitud activa. Este cambio —enfatisa Gramsci— conduce a una explosión de reivindicaciones que surgen directamente de las masas movilizadas, aunque, en estas circunstancias, constituyen un todo «inorgánico», es decir, incoherente. Sin embargo, para Gramsci no dejan de ser una «revolución», un movimiento que exige una ruptura radical para ponerle fin a una crisis devenida crisis de hegemonía, es decir, una crisis que afecta a todo el Estado. El concepto de «crisis orgánica» no basta para dar cuenta de la crisis revolucionaria, pero contiene algunos de sus elementos más importantes. El resultado final depende sobre todo de la intervención «subjetiva» de las fuerzas políticas que luchan para tomar la dirección del proceso y canalizarlo en una dirección determinada.

Este análisis nos brinda una clave para comprender los rasgos específicos de la crisis griega de 2011 y los meses subsiguientes. Con toda evidencia, la terapia de choque impuesta por los memorándums manifestó una derrota estratégica de la burguesía griega: deshizo los fundamentos del contrato social forjado luego de la caída del régimen militar en 1974, transformó las perspectivas de «integración europea» de Grecia en una pesadilla e impuso un régimen de tutelaje permanente y una merma considerable de soberanía nacional. Para sostener su dominio sobre el país, la clase dominante tuvo que aceptar un lugar subalterno y un deterioro drástico de su posición internacional.

The combination of these three dimensions (social, ideological and national) led to the delegitimization, not only of the dominant political strata, but also of the hegemonic system as a whole. Hence the collapse of credibility in the media, in the "organic intellectuals" of the dominant sectors and in the representative institutions (even in the forces that operated as a faithful opposition). All of this called into question the elites' ability to run the country and the bipartisan system's ability to provide viable solutions.

It is worth emphasizing the national dimension of the crisis. The tutelage imposed by the [Troika](#) (the European Union, the European Central Bank and the IMF) deprived the Greek ruling class and its servants of their "national function". The loss was accompanied by an attack on the working class, unprecedented in post-war Western European societies, although very similar to the "structural adjustment" programs promoted by the IMF and the World Bank in many countries of the Global South and Eastern Europe, beginning in the 1980s.

The combination of the loss of national sovereignty and the violence of the anti-social offensive explains the depth and widespread character of the Greek crisis, especially when compared to the Portuguese or Spanish situation of that same year. It also explains why the most widespread gesture in the occupied squares was the flaming Greek flag, which baffled left-wing activists who refused to understand its meaning. Unprecedented since the days of the [military dictatorship](#) (1967-1974), this reappropriation of the flag arose as a reaction to the imposition of the dictates of the Troika, a message from the people who proclaimed themselves as the "real" Greece, differentiating themselves from those who intended to act on its behalf. This hegemonic collapse also represented a historic opportunity for the more radicalized left. For the first time in decades, the left found itself in a position to fight for hegemony, that is, in an exceptional situation in any "mature" parliamentary regime.

### **Towards a revolutionary crisis?**

The occupation of the squares also revealed a second aspect of the organic crisis: the moment when the masses, who far exceeded the militants who had hitherto led the mobilizations against the Troika, came to occupy the center of the scene. This confluence was by no means an automatic process. The most combative trade unions, and the

intervention of the radical left in the popular assemblies held in the occupied spaces, made it possible to gradually overcome the mutual distrust of the first weeks, fed by the discredited leaders of the trade union confederation. Without merging in organic terms, the "people of the squares" thus converged with the workers' movement. The popular mobilization reached its peak in the three days of the general strike – June 15, 28 and 29 – which had unprecedented levels of participation since the 1970s. In this sense, the Greek movement followed a different path from that [of the indignant Spaniards](#), who had no significant exchange with the workers' movement, and ended up looking more like the [Egyptian](#) and [Tunisian](#) cases.

This further highlights the exceptional magnitude of the Greek movement. Clearly, the proportion of the mobilized population was larger than in the case of Spain and it is not difficult to compare it with the Arab uprisings. According to some [polls](#), at the beginning of June 2011 at least 2,800,000 Greeks – 30% of the adult population! – declared that they would participate "definitively" in the protests, to which is added a large 21% who said they would attend "very likely". Meanwhile, 35% said they had participated in marches and other popular initiatives organized during the previous period. A realistic estimate is that, in the mobilizations that accompanied the general strike of June 28 and 29, at least a third of the population actively participated. Moreover, in the polls of the period, at least two-thirds of Greeks declared to reject the memorandums and the Troika regime.

This majority dynamic also explains the duration of the mobilizations and their intensity. Despite the ebb and flow of the movement of the squares that followed the vote of the "intermediate" memorandum of June 29, the mobilization reached a new peak a few months later. On October 19 and 20, a general strike, the most massive seen since the fall of the dictatorship, completely paralyzed Greece. A week later, on October 28 — the holiday celebrating the "No" to Mussolini of 1940 — people took to the streets and forced the disruption of military parades and the withdrawal of state officials. At the same time, Prime Minister George Papandreou, humiliated at the European summit held in Cannes, where he proposed a referendum on the memos, resigned from his post to favor a broad coalition movement led by the EU and led by banker Loukas Papademos. Seeing his support waning, both inside and outside parliament, Papademos called early elections in May 2012 and, failing to build a majority, did so again in June. This double election effected the collapse of the two-party system, whose pillars – the social democracy of

PASOK and the right of New Democracy – went from having won 77.4% of the votes in November 2009 to staying with only 42%.

Por lo tanto, no es exagerado decir que la crisis griega mostró algunos de los rasgos aludidos en la [célebre definición que dio Lenin](#) de una situación revolucionaria, que es a la vez una de las principales fuentes de la noción gramsciana de «crisis orgánica»:

*La revolución solo puede triunfar cuando los «de abajo» no quieren y los «de arriba» no pueden seguir viviendo como antes. Esta verdad también puede expresarse en otras palabras: la revolución es imposible sin una crisis nacional general (que afecte a explotados y explotadores).*

Pero la condición faltante —y la más decisiva— fue otra, una que suele recibir menos atención, pero que también es mencionada por Lenin en este pasaje:

*[T]he majority of workers (or, in any case, the majority of conscious, thoughtful, politically active workers) fully understand the necessity of revolution and are willing to sacrifice their lives for it.*

In other words, there can be no revolution if the masses do not support revolutionary solutions; and this support is not an automatic result of the mass movement. Some kind of intervention and political preparation is needed. This type of political consciousness did not define an uprising whose horizon was formed exclusively in terms of the visceral rejection of the Troika and the politicians of the day, and not of the will to overthrow the existing social order. But it is true that, for the first time since the great uprisings of the 1960s and 1970s, in a European country that seemed to once again become the "weak link" of the continental center of capitalism, the possibility of a rupture of the social and political balance of forces was presented.

### **The greatness of movement and its limits**

The square movement of 2011 grew out of a long series of insurrectionary events punctuated by modern Greek history. But even if it explains its greatness, the explosive and sudden character of the uprising also made it an extremely contradictory fact. The

"people of the squares" lacked any previous experience of organizing or participating in collective actions, which is why they raised a series of demands and practices that Gramsci had defined as "incoherent". Anyone who was in Syntagma Square at the time will remember the mixture of anger and combativeness, the football atmosphere and genuine radicalism, in short, an indiscriminate rejection of politics combined with a search for self-organization and direct participation in public affairs. This jumble of attitudes and practices was accompanied by a certain fascination with finding "magic solutions" to the crisis: from calls to recover the old "Athenian democracy" to various conspiracy theories that sought to explain the causes of public debt.

Perhaps the most important contradiction was that expressed in the most popular slogan of the square movement: the vindication of the άμεση δημοκρατία, usually translated as "direct democracy". However, the Greek term άμεση is best translated as "immediate", as it means "without mediation", that is, "direct", and at the same time something that must be done "immediately". In this sense, one of the main limits of the movement of the squares lies in the fact that it did not know how to give a real content to this claim of "immediate democracy".

For many, the slogan referred to a form of spontaneous – or, rather, brutal – anti-parliamentarism, illustrated by the shocking and multitudinous chant heard in Syntagma Square: "Let us burn this parliament, which is nothing more than a brothel". For others it referred to a libertarian idea of democracy without mediation, that is, a purely "horizontal" model inspired by the forms of self-organization that emerged in the occupied squares. There were also those who thought that he was referring to an institutional reform as radical as it was indefinite, which would establish a "real democracy", or, at least, a democratic functioning suppressed by the Troika regime and the authoritarianism that it entailed. In addition, the initial call to occupy the squares – which ended up giving its name to the page and Facebook group of the movement of the Síntagma square – was made under the title "Real democracy now!", a direct reference to the Puerta del Sol in Madrid.

The movement of the squares did not succeed in synthesizing these ideas in terms of an alternative political project, nor did it manage to generate an alternative economic reorganization that went beyond the rejection of austerity and the tutelage of the Troika. In



this sense, he shared the "negative" character of the uprisings of the last decade, [defined](#) by Alain Badiou in terms of the reason that their main factor of unity, if not the only one, is the generalized rejection of the rulers. It now seems evident that the absence of an alternative project, far from freeing politics from the weight of "ideologies" and "grand narratives" – as many postmodern intellectuals would have us think – leads to impotence and, in general, to a reactionary restoration, of which the brutal dictatorship of Abdulfatah al-Sisi is the most terrible example.

However, the main limit of movement was on another level, one from which all limits "ultimately" emerged. It was not just the inability to formulate a global alternative, nor even the impossibility of stopping the vote on the memorandum in parliament. Indeed, well considered, these goals seemed far from the reach of a heterogeneous and eruptive movement whose life expectancy was counted in weeks. The decisive problem was that it did not have an organizational framework — not even a project — capable of elevating the popular struggle to another level.

However, it left us some valuable elements to undertake this task. Basically, it renewed the repertoire of collective action and [stimulated many local initiatives](#) of solidarity, self-organization and direct action. But he did not elaborate a way capable of organizing and coordinating with autonomy the popular struggle during the following period, a limit shared by other similar movements that broke out at that time and that continues to affect many that arise today. The movement was then unable to cross a certain threshold of its own capacities to develop broader alternative perspectives and interact productively with other political actors. This was the main cause of the discrepancy between the impressive strength of the movement and its inability to achieve tangible and positive results.

## **Capitulation**

At first glance, Greece seems to be an exception to the strictly negative principle of unity defined – and criticized – by Alain Badiou. The cycle of popular mobilization of 2010-2012 effectively led to a real transformation of the political scene, from which Syriza especially benefited. It was the only force that showed willingness to satisfy the demand for a political rupture that arose from the mobilizations and that they were unable to conquer by their own means. In this context – always taking into account the symbolic



weight of the radical left in a country that experienced a civil war and decades of anti-communist persecution – the proposal for an "anti-austerity left government" was presented as a decision to break with the existing situation. Despite its "negative" or defensive objectives – to put an end to austerity and the tutelage of the Troika – Syriza was perceived as an attempt to overcome the traditional role of subordinate opposition that the two-party system assigns to the left and to pose the question of power in effective terms. At least in this sense, Syriza emerged as a force that understood the opportunity posed by the "organic crisis". It is one of the fundamental lessons that this whole period leaves us: popular mobilization is capable of creating the conditions for a shift to the left but, for these conditions to materialize, a potentially hegemonic political proposal is needed.

This also raises the problem of the responsibilities—and ultimately the failure—of the organization that was able to play that role. In the absence of a systematic analysis, we will simply say that Syriza's problem was in its strictly electoral management of the dynamic created by the mobilization from below, that is, that it contained the conflict at the levels necessary to succeed at the polls. He never proposed a plan to organize the popular struggle, a more general perspective, nor did he prepare himself to face the most immediate conditions posed by the possibility of a triumph. Among these conditions, one had a decisive strategic importance: the confrontation with the EU and the mechanisms it would predictably use against the government that dared to challenge its policies, starting with the ECB's "nuclear weapon", the euro.

The capitulation of Syriza does not imply that nothing has happened, that is, that during those first seven months of 2015 a historic bet has not been made – and lost. But it shows us that the moment of truth was not so much the electoral success achieved by Syriza in January 2015, but the fact that this triumph has intensified the previous cycle of conflicts, begun in 2010 and generalized against the will of the figures that the mobilization itself had placed in the government. The moment of truth came in 2015 with the referendum on the EU austerity package. Although for a short time, the "hot spring" of 2011 effectively resurrected, not in the electoral victory of Syriza, but in the mobilization of July 3, 2015 in Syntagma Square and in 61.3% of the votes for the "No" in the referendum of July 5.

Although the resounding "No" provoked everyone's surprise, it was [reversed a few days later](#); in the hands of those who received it as an unsustainable burden, it quickly became a "Yes" to EU austerity. Overnight, when Alexis Tsipras signed the third memorandum, Greece ceased to be a beacon of hope to become a trauma from which the international left is not recovering.

In any case, it is essential that the lessons that this experience leaves us are not lost. The first is that not even a mass movement as large as that is capable of providing the necessary solutions to the problems posed by its own emergence. Politics is still necessary and is ultimately the decisive factor that informs the outcome of any situation. But it was also clear that we must not consent to any political proposal that presents itself as "the left" and refuses at the same time to elaborate the means capable of leading the people to victory.

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