**A New Eurocommunism?**

**The Political Theory and Practice of SYRIZA**

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I. Introduction

Since 2008, the European Union has seen the rise of a new form of anti-austerity political movements and parties. Of these, the Greek party Syriza has been the most prominent and the most controversial. Since coming into power in January 2015, its opposition and eventual conciliation with the so-called troika (the International Monetary Fund, the European Central Bank, and the European Commission) dominated news headlines. Prior to then, Syriza’s rise to the status of a major political party of the radical Left suggested a turning point in both Greek politics, and the European Union more broadly. For the hopeful, Syriza represented the re-emergence of mass-based radical politics in response to the convergence of the conservative New Democracy and social democratic PASOK parties on a position of centrist, technocratic liberalism, and their increasingly apparent inability to govern the Greek state in the midst of the Eurozone crisis. At least for a brief moment, Syriza appeared to represent the consolidation of a new wave of popular mobilization emerging in response to the democratic deficit and neoliberalism of the EU.

Much has been written in recent months about the party’s turbulent time in power and its leadership’s inability to follow up on the anti-austerity program that made it so popular with voters. Rather than focusing on that aspect of the story, this essay seeks to evaluate the meaning of Syriza more broadly, as indicative of both the strategies and the challenges facing radical political movements in the new millennium, and what differentiates these movements from traditional forms of political organizing on the Left. While these responses to austerity in the southern Eurozone (Greece, Spain, Portugal) have their proximate cause in the global financial crisis of 2007-08, the intellectual influences and political strategies informing these movements originate further back in the past. In particular, it is possible to draw a historical analogy to the current situation—namely, the brief prominence of Eurocommunism in the mid to late 1970s. During that time, a number of European Communist parties—most prominently in France, Spain, and Italy—tentatively adopted a series of principles occupying a space between social democratic reformism and Leninist vanguardism as a form of a new political strategy to arrive at socialism by mass democratic means. While Eurocommunism itself contained many internal tensions, both as an intellectual position and as a political strategy, it is possible to view it as a historical precursor to the emergence of today’s cross-coalitional Left exemplified in Syriza.

To trace this influence and historical affinity, it is worthwhile to examine the theory of the state and of class struggle put forward by the Greek-French sociologist Nicos Poulantzas, especially in his final book *State Power Socialism,* published in 1978. In writing what was at the time the most sophisticated explication of the capitalist state from a Marxist perspective, Poulantzas characterized the state neither as an instrument in the hands of the ruling class nor as a neutral institution, but as a site of economic, political, and ideological struggles on the parts of various classes and movements. As a proponent of the Left tendency of Eurocommunism, Poulantzas had a political goal: to provide the theoretical foundation for a mass movement that could utilize a dual strategy of participation in state institutions and external pressure from radical mobilizations beyond the state, all in order to bring about a series of ruptural breaks leading from capitalism to democratic socialism. Although Poulantzas died in 1979, his intellectual legacy permeated the Greek Left over the course of the following decades. Writing at a point in which orthodox Marxism had been undergoing an intellectual crisis, Poulantzas was ahead of his time in anticipating the rise of a new form of Left politics, emphasizing a pluralistic form of social struggles not strictly from the vantage point of class but also including “new” concerns such as human rights, gender, and ecology.

Therefore, this essay seeks to show that rather than being a novel political phenomenon, Syriza is indebted to certain Eurocommunist tendencies in its ideological roots and organizational practices. In addition, it evaluates Syriza’s development and time in power in light of the possible strategies available for a Left political movement within the constraints of a liberal-parliamentary regime experiencing a critical juncture, as Greece has been from 2009-2015. Poulantzas serves as a productive lens from which to evaluate this moment both due to his intellectual influence for the postwar Greek Left, and for the fact that he attempted to theorize the possibility of a democratic transition to socialism in such moments of crisis. Naturally, this exercise does not mean reading Syriza backwards into Poulantzas, nor simply projecting Poulantzas’ ideas onto a political situation forty years later. It is not the case that the strategy and actions of any political party, let alone one acting in a turbulent time as Syriza was in 2015, can be expected to reflect a coherent and consistent set of doctrines. Instead, what should be emphasized is that from his vantage point Poulantzas was analyzing and grappling with a series of questions about the political strategy of European parties on the Left that were being posed by a changing set of circumstances. These circumstances—the crisis of the organized Left, the growing internationalization of capital, and the adoption of neoliberal policies by the ruling classes of liberal democracies—have reappeared today, albeit in a different mode that sees the Left in search of a new vision and the greater intensification and interpenetration of the international and national spheres.

The paper proceeds as follows: The next section will outline the basic principles of the Eurocommunist movement, in order to illustrate the initial attempt on the part of the European radical Left to renounce its Leninist legacy and acclimate itself to parliamentary politics. From there on, it describes in greater detail Poulantzas’ own contribution to this strand of thinking. Following that, it turns to a discussion of Syriza’s origins and rise to prominence, evaluating the party’s ideological affinities to Left-Eurocommunism and the possible ways this was manifested in its political strategy up until the point of its taking power. The paper concludes by reflecting on how Syriza’s example can shed light on both the opportunities and the limitations available for the anti-austerity movements in the EU, and perhaps for the organized Left more broadly.

II. The Eurocommunist Turn

In the aftermath of the Prague Spring, some Communist parties—most notably the Italian (PCI), and to a lesser degree the French (PCF) and Spanish (PCE)—began pivoting away from the Soviet Union to the liberal-democratic regimes of the West. Internal debates arose about the USSR’s repression of dissident voices, and the inadequacy of the Leninist strategy for taking state power in a liberal democratic context. In addition, the student uprisings of 1968 and the rise of the women’s movement appeared as signs that the Communist parties should broaden their political membership beyond a reliance on the working class. In short, as Ralph Miliband had put it at the time, it became increasingly apparent that “dissociation from the example of the USSR became a condition of political viability let alone success.”[[1]](#footnote-1)

In a sense, Eurocommunism represented a belated theoretical attempt to justify the parliamentary approach that had already long been part of the practice of Communist parties in the West, essentially since the doctrine of peaceful coexistence was first outlined by Khrushchev during the Twentieth Congress of the CPSU. Although Eurocommunists insisted that they were pursuing a path different from those of social democracy, their theoretical shifts made notable breaks with Marxist-Leninist ideology. As one author summarizes, “Eurocommunism discarded the vanguard party, the univocal bourgeois character of the liberal democratic state and the strategic objective of the dictatorship of the proletariat.” In its place, Eurocommunist parties advocated participating as partners in an alliance forming a democratic front; a democratization and decentralization of the state via an extension of parliamentary control over insular state institutions such as the bureaucracy and the police; and the adoption of a democratically planned mixed economy with elements of workers’ self-management.[[2]](#footnote-2) These policies in turn necessitated a greater degree of independence from Moscow. Pursued to its conclusion on the national level, a prolonged struggle could eventually make it possible, in Santiago Carrillo’s words, to reach a supranational goal of a “Europe independent of the USSR and the United States, a Europe of the peoples, oriented towards socialism, in which our country will preserve its own individuality.”[[3]](#footnote-3)

At stake between proponents of Eurocommunism and more “traditional” radicals was the question of whether the “democracy” they saw as being inherent and compatible with socialism was the same conception of democracy found in Western liberal regimes.[[4]](#footnote-4) This was not an innocent matter, since the answer determined the range of tactics and long-term outlook of the movement. If the political liberties and social advances won by the working class in the postwar arrangement were taken as a sign that these regimes were essentially open to reform and a deepening of their formal democracies, then the task of Communist parties was not to advocate for a smashing of the state but for an incremental and gradualist strategy by which the state would be surrounded and penetrated by a new hegemonic coalition. Hence, key for Eurocommunism was a theoretical break with Leninism.

Its search for an alternative has led Eurocommunism to be called a “vain, doomed attempt” to bring together two distinct theoretical strands within the history of Marxist thought, those of Karl Kautsky and Antonio Gramsci.[[5]](#footnote-5) This tension resulted in Right (parliamentarian) and Left (strategic-hegemonic) variants of Eurocommunism, although these constituted a spectrum rather than two separate camps. While both Right and Left Eurocommunists converged on the idea of a democratic transition to socialism from within the framework of the bourgeois-democratic state, their tactical differences about how this transition would take place repeated the turn of the century debates between the right and left wings of the Second International. Whereas the Right maintained that this would be a gradual transition, the Left still saw the necessity of a series of breaks with bourgeois politics, ideology, and economics. Yet there were few specific explanations for what would constitute these ruptures or the anticipated stages by which the transition would take place. Therefore, more radical Eurocommunists were left with Fernando Claudin’s envisioning of a “system of multiple, shifting alliances and convergences” between political parties, trade unions, and other mass movements—in other words, a diverse political alliance not led by the party of the working class but by a plurality of actors on the political scene.[[6]](#footnote-6)

In terms of political organization, Eurocommunism rejected the Leninist idea of workers’ councils as the basis of state power, cautioning that this would only enable the gradual centralization of power in the Party and its eventual fusion with the state. In 1976 the PCF famously renounced the notion of the dictatorship of the proletariat, and two years later in a symbolic move opposed by one third of the delegates at that year’s Party congress, the PCE abandoned Leninism.[[7]](#footnote-7) In place of the Leninist model, proponents of Eurocommunism (especially its reformist variants) largely saw it as an essentially neutral entity that could be transformed into a democratic instrument by way of working class participation in its official channels. In addition, within the state, parliaments elected by a secret and universal vote, and a multi-party, competitive system were key components for maintaining a distribution of political power.

In relation to other political parties, Eurocommunist strategy sought to bring a convergence with socialist, social democratic, and progressive Christian forces resembling the interwar Popular Fronts in France and Spain. This openness to alliances with other progressive forces initially resulted in successes for Eurocommunist parties during the mid-1970s. The PCI won a third of the popular vote in June 1976 and entered the governing majority for the first time in thirty years; in France the PCF and the more numerous Socialist Party formed a common program, the Union of the Left; and the PCE immediately became a prominent player on the political scene in the liberalization that followed in the wake of Franco’s death. A 1977 summit in Madrid bringing the three parties together seemed to have put them on a common political and ideological path. But these reasons for optimism were short lived. The Union of the Left split in that same year, and the 1978 elections saw the PCF losing members to the Socialist Party. The PCI suffered from a declining parliamentary presence in subsequent elections after their 1976 triumph. The PCF and the PCE suffered unambiguous electoral defeats in 1981-1982 that saw them lose ground to socialist parties. From that point forward, all three parties entered a period of uncertainty and decline. The PCI disbanded in 1991; the PCE merged into the United Left electoral coalition; while the PCF remained but never again achieved its level of popularity.

III. The Democratic Road to Socialism

Because of its difficult postwar legacy, the path of the Left in Greece cannot be understood apart from the rupture created by the military regime that ruled the country from 1967 to 1974, and which had dissolved all political parties upon seizing power. One year after the junta came into power and in the wake of the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia, the Communist Party of Greece (KKE) split into two factions. The breakaway group, calling itself KKE of the Interior, oriented itself toward the West European Left rather than the Soviet Union. Although he was living in France during this time, Nicos Poulantzas was undoubtedly a key intellectual in the sphere of Greek politics of the 1970s, and in particular for the KKE-I.[[8]](#footnote-8) Being the most important intellectual of the party, as well as one of the most widely read social theorists of the 1970s in Europe, North America, and Latin America, Poulantzas has been considered by some to be the intellectual precursor of Eurocommunism.[[9]](#footnote-9) As a member of the KKE-I, Poulantzas saw the old KKE as having remained a largely unreformed Stalinist party, and toward the end of his life he adopted a Left-Eurocommunist position that attempted to carve out a democratic road toward socialism.[[10]](#footnote-10)

For Poulantzas, the basic dilemma from which the Left needed to extricate itself was to “*either* maintain the existing State and stick exclusively to a modified form of representative democracy—a road that ends up in social-democratic Statism and so-called liberal parliamentarianism; *or* base everything on direct, rank-and-file democracy or the movement for self management—a path which, sooner or later, inevitably leads to statist despotism or the dictatorship of experts.”[[11]](#footnote-11) Instead, the democratic road to socialism involved maintaining a productive tension between existing forms of representative democracy and an expansion of direct democratic institutions at the level of the masses. But why had the Left been previously unable to combine these two aspects of the class struggle? In addition, given the previous outcomes of Marxist parties participating in bourgeois electoral regimes, why did Poulantzas think that a democratic road to socialism was viable? The answer can largely be found in his theorization of the capitalist state, and what he considered the failure of previous Left movements to adequately do so, which in turn affected their revolutionary strategy.

The topic of the capitalist state formed the overarching concern of Poulantzas’ intellectual career. In a number of works over the course of the 1960s-70s, most notably *Political Power and Social Classes* (1968), *Classes in Contemporary Capitalism* (1974), and *The Crisis of the Dictatorships* (1975), Poulantzas developed a sophisticated theory of the capitalist state. Although he initially drew upon an Althusserian framework to theorize the state as an objective structure necessary for the reproduction of capitalism, Poulantzas subsequently moved closer to an approach that emphasized the role of the class struggle in shaping the state. This effort culminated in his final work, *State Power Socialism* (1978), in which Poulantzas proposed a conception of the state as a relation, or condensation, of social forces.

What distinguished Poulantzas from previous Marxist attempts at theorizing the state was his emphasis on the relative autonomy of the capitalist state in relation to social classes. This suggestion involved a break from the two previously dominant conceptions of the state within twentieth century Marxism: those of Lenin and Gramsci. Although the two differed, most notably on questions of tactical strategy and whether the state was to be attacked frontally or encircled, Poulantzas saw both as essentially reproducing a conception of the state that was too dependent on the problematic metaphor of base and superstructure. In some of his writings, Lenin had represented the state as a “monolithic bloc without divisions, with almost no internal contradictions, and which can only be attacked globally and frontally from without by establishing the counter-state,” in the form of centralized soviets and dual power.[[12]](#footnote-12) Such a strategy may have been appropriate for dealing with the repressive Tsarist state, but appeared increasingly outmoded for dealing with the political realities of postwar liberal-capitalist regimes. Meanwhile Gramsci—whose rediscovery in the 1960s had asserted him as the intellectual godfather of Eurocommunism—had been a more perceptive analyst of the functioning of hegemony in these states, but had mistakenly thought that the working class’s ideological and political hegemony could be formed independently, as a precondition ofdemocratic socialism, rather than through the process of political struggle and the formation of alliances.[[13]](#footnote-13)

For Poulantzas, the structural purpose of the capitalist state was to facilitate the reproduction of capitalist social relations. Most notably, this required the state to intervene through its repressive and ideological means to demobilize the working class, while at the same time coalescing the fragmented capitalist class into a unitary power bloc. However, this relative autonomy was subject to a key contradiction: the necessary autonomy required by the capitalist state in order to reproduce the social order also left it beyond the full control of any single class or fraction. The intensity of the class struggle in a given place and time also turned the state into a contested field that always needed to take into account the interests of the dominated classes, and did not always successfully integrate them into the reproduction of the social order. As he wrote,

“The establishment of the State’s policy must be seen as the result of the class contradictions inscribed in the very structure of the State (the State as a relationship). The State is the condensation of a relationship of forces between classes and class fractions, such as these express themselves, in a necessarily specific form, within the State itself … Class contradictions are the very stuff of the state: they are present in its material framework and pattern its organization; while the State’s policy is the result of their functioning within the State.”[[14]](#footnote-14)

In conceiving of the state as a social relation, Poulantzas rejected the idea that the state was a political object with clearly defined boundaries, which was the dominant view of orthodox Communist parties taken from Lenin’s *State and Revolution.* From the latter view, which concentrated on the state’s repressive dimension and saw it as a hermetically sealed entity distinct from civil society, the political implication was either a frontal assault on the state by building up a system of dual power or the Gramscian solution of encircling the state through the consolidation of hegemony in civil society. In contrast, if the state was a condensation or relation of class forces, the boundaries between state and civil society were much less clear and so much more permeable. From this permeability, Poulantzas pointed toward a possible strategy that rejected an exclusive reliance on either parliamentary reformism or a militant strategy of council democracy as a rival center of popular power.

Poulantzas was skeptical that a centralized political party could capture the diverse political and social struggles that came to characterize postwar capitalist societies. In addition, he was highly suspicious that the Leninist call for council democracy, if not balanced by institutions of representative democracy, would soon consolidate into a “dictatorship of the Party” rather than an authentic dictatorship of the proletariat. The conflation of the party and the state in the post-revolutionary period was one of the most troubling legacies of Leninism. In addition, this confusion was inseparable from Lenin’s view of the state as a repressive monolith rather than as a fragmented and permeable social relation, which then required a political strategy focusing on the concentration of a parallel power (the soviets) through which the bourgeois state would be dismantled. Therefore, unlike his contemporaries such as Etienne Balibar, Poulantzas supported the PCF’s decision to abandon the idea of the dictatorship of the proletariat, seeing in it an impediment to the process of making successful alliances among various classes and class fractions at the base of the party.

Rather than eschewing either the party form or the wider social movement, Poulantzas envisioned a tactical combination of both. Instead of mounting a frontal assault on the state, the task was to expand and deepen the existing but insufficient formal-representative democracy found in Western capitalist states. This would be done through both an organized, electoral struggle of resistance on the terrain of the state, and a mass struggle outside the institutions and apparatuses of the state leveraging the structures of direct democracy at the base of the movement, with both exerting continuous pressure on existing state institutions.[[15]](#footnote-15) Thus, representative democracy on the level of the state would be complemented by a direct democratic struggle originating outside the state. This dual strategy would displace the working class and the communist party as *the* single privileged subject of the struggle, in place of an alliance of the popular classes, including such previously “secondary” concerns as the feminist and ecological movements. Importantly, Poulantzas did not identify this with a social democratic reformism but emphasized that the transition would be brought about by a “*stage of real breaks*, the climax of which – and there has to be one – is reached when the relationship of forces on the strategic terrain of the State swings over to the side of the popular masses.”[[16]](#footnote-16) Culminating in this ruptural transition characterized by a crisis of the capitalist state, the balance of forces would give way to a new form of political organization, based on the already-existing mechanisms of direct workers’ democracy.

At the time, critics of Poulantzas, especially from the Trotskyist tradition, had pointed out that his emphasis on the contradictory character of the capitalist state had obscured the fact that in the final instance it still remained an instrument of class domination.[[17]](#footnote-17) This had led Poulantzas to ultimately advocate an ineffective piecemeal reformism that left the political and economical institutions of bourgeois power intact.[[18]](#footnote-18) Indeed, in some aspects of his thinking, Poulantzas had warned against rushing into ruptural breaks such as dismantling the state’s economic apparatus, which would only paralyze the state and mobilize the bourgeoisie in opposition.[[19]](#footnote-19) In addition, the democratic road to socialism required there to remain a plurality of parties, which inherently swung the balance of power in favor of the status quo and risked the stagnation of the movement into parliamentary reformism. In response, Poulantzas maintained that a more militant strategy would doom a mass movement to failure, for no capitalist state, not even one undergoing a crisis such as Portugal in 1974, would allow the establishment of a dual power without first resorting to a military intervention. The only possibility Poulantzas saw was a union between the socialist and communist Left, such as the Common Programme entered into by the Socialist Party and the PCF in 1972, with the far left acting as an extra-parliamentary catalyst to prevent social-democratic stagnation.[[20]](#footnote-20)

Calling Poulantzas the preeminent theorist of Eurocommunism would overstate his influence, and understate those of now-forgotten writers on both the Left and Right of the Eurocommunist spectrum such as Santiago Carillo, Fernando Claudin, Lucio Magri, and Rossana Rossanda. However, there are two reasons for why Poulantzas’ account summarized above is particularly noteworthy for understanding Syriza. First, Poulantzas’ membership and involvement in the KKE-I links him to the political lineage from which Syriza emerged, and there is no doubt he exercised an intellectual influence over the Greek Left, including for a number of figures involved with Syriza. Second, Poulantzas’ conception of the state, of the centrality of the class struggle, and of political strategy gave a theoretical expression to the newer form of radical politics characteristic to the European New Left. In the last few years Greece has been at the center of debates about the meaning of state power and the tactical relation to the state that Left movements should take. Therefore, bringing elements of Poulantzas’ analysis to bear on the contemporary Greek situation (a situation partly shaped by his legacy) can serve as a kind of immanent critique, unfortunately illustrating the distance between the hopes of democratic socialism and the political realities of the present day.

IV. The Greek Case

In recent years, a number of analyses have attempted to explain the Greek crisis by discussing the character of the Greek state. From a centrist liberal perspective, the clientelism and corruption that have characterized the Greek political scene since the early 1980s is explained as the triumph of populism (both New Democracy and PASOK) that has allowed organized interests to extract resources from the state.[[21]](#footnote-21) From the radical Left, the weakness of the Greek state can be explained by precisely the opposite: the failure of the popular Greek classes to reach a permanent form of representation, thereby depriving them from a more institutionalized form of social compromise found in the welfare states of Northern Europe, and the perpetuation of a close relationship between fractional capitalist interests and the state.[[22]](#footnote-22) In both cases, there is agreement that the corruption of the Greek state, characterized by a close relationship between capital and the state’s repressive and administrative institutions, is a political reality. The turmoil of Greek politics in recent years has largely resulted in the state and the political establishment being completely discredited in the eyes of citizens. It has been noted that the massive wave of uprisings across the country in December 2008, prompted by the shooting of an unarmed youth, specifically targeted symbols of state power and were a “refusal of the state in its totality, and not only of the government.”[[23]](#footnote-23) Therefore, it would not be an exaggeration to say that for the last seven years, the Greek state has been experiencing a prolonged legitimation crisis.

Syriza’s rapid rise in the polls from 2009-2015—the first electoral triumph of the radical Left in postwar Europe—placed it at the forefront of the anti-austerity movement within the EU. Yet Syriza’s roots run deep within the Greek political scene, and can be traced back through the fragmented Greek Left in the years after the junta.[[24]](#footnote-24) In 1977, just two years before Poulantzas’ death, the KKE-I to which he belonged had a worse electoral showing than the KKE; given the success of the aforementioned Eurocommunist parties at the time, this was a sign that Greek politics in the wake of the junta differed notably from those in other Southern European countries. Despite this inability of the KKE-I to become the predominant party on the Left, it remained active until its split in 1987. By that point the social-democratic PASOK had come to stand for the center-left, and the KKE-I’s main successor, the “Greek Left”, chose to abandon Marxism-Leninism.[[25]](#footnote-25) A tenuous re-alliance between the two factions of the KKE gave way to a final split in 1991, resulting in a protracted rivalry between the “reformist” Synaspismos (the inheritor of the KKE-I/Greek Left) and the “unreformed” KKE. For the following decade, the latter continued to dominate the Greek far-left. However, in 2004, Synaspismos became the major faction within the newly formed Coalition of the Radical Left (Syriza), composed of a number of diverse Left groups, including the aforementioned remnants of the KKE Interior, Trotskyists, Maoists, libertarian communists, eco-socialists, and left-Socialists.[[26]](#footnote-26) Drawing these together was a common overlap of opposition to NATO, the Iraq War, globalization, and domestic fascist and xenophobic movements.

Between 2004 and 2013, when it became a unified party, Syriza shifted from a Eurocommunist to a radical anti-capitalist stance due to the growing prominence of the alter-globalization movements. The umbrella alliance effectively pushed Syriza further to the left of the original position of Synaspismos during the 1990s. (The 2010 departure of the right-Eurocommunist “Greek Left” faction to form the Democratic Left (DIMAR) solidified this shift). However, during this period Syriza remained electorally overshadowed by the better-organized KKE. It was only with the onset of the massive anti-austerity and anti-state protest movements that gathered in Athens’ Syntagma Square and in other public spaces across the country in 2011-2012 that Syriza became the official Left opposition to the increasingly shaken Greek government. While the KKE and the newly-formed Antarsya (the Front of the Anticapitalist Left) dissociated themselves from this Movement of the Squares, which generally had a populist rather than class-based character, Syriza’s support helped bolster its share of the Greek vote at their expense.[[27]](#footnote-27) Riding this wave of a mobilized and pluralistic civil society, Syriza’s vote share rose to 27% in June 2012, and eventually to 36% in January 2015, enabling it to enter into a governing coalition with the nationalist-conservative Independent Greeks.

Recent scholarship drawing upon the insights of Laclau and Mouffe has suggested that Syriza represents a distinct form of left-wing populism, as evidenced by the party’s appeal to “the people” and use of an antagonistic discursive logic.[[28]](#footnote-28) Although populism was not new to the Greek political scene, having previously been effectively utilized by PASOK in the 1980s, Syriza’s renewal of this discourse is notable in that it was used towards the creation of a coalitional political strategy. (Its tricolor flag scheme—red for socialism, green for ecology, and purple for feminism, and migrant and gay rights—represents the cross-coalitional strategy characterizing the post-1989 radical Left.) A mobilization of society against signifiers such as “neoliberalism” and “austerity” bridges class distinctions and seeks to represent a common national unity. The party’s resolution at its first congress in 2013 presented it as based on an alliance of the popular classes with the middle classes of the town and the countryside: “The forces of wage labor, the hundreds of thousands of unemployed people, the army of highly-qualified young people who cannot find a job, the self-employed, the small and medium-sized farmers, and the small and medium-sized businesses all form a social bloc with fundamentally different interests from the dominant ones.”[[29]](#footnote-29) In contrast, the dominant bloc is that of capital, both domestic and foreign, propped up by a triangle of the political system, the banks, and the media. Syriza would represent the formation of an opposition bloc, a “mass multiform social movement” drawing from the forces of wage labor, the unemployed and self-employed, the middle classes of the town and the countryside, and new social movements (student, feminist, ecological).

Rather than being a political innovation, this framing repeated a key aspect of Eurocommunist strategy: a cross-class alliance that attempts to win a substantial portion of the population, including the middle and professional classes, to socialism.[[30]](#footnote-30) During the 2012 and 2015 elections Syriza’s voter base was heavily concentrated in the urban areas and included many middle-class professionals, civil servants, the intelligentsia, and in general, the white collar educated classes who had previously voted for either PASOK or New Democracy. Unlike the KKE, whose base of support remained grounded in the trade unions, Syriza had managed to mobilize these “new” working classes while also gradually increasing its base of support among the trade unions.[[31]](#footnote-31)

An additional reflection of Syriza’s Eurocommunist roots is the way that it has drawn upon the legacy of Poulantzas. Among the party’s ranks are Constantinos Tsoukalas (MP), a prominent professor of sociology at the University of Athens who had known Poulantzas personally, and Aristides Baltas, an expert on Althusserian philosophy who now serves as the government’s Minister of Culture and Sports. In addition, Baltas is also the current president of the Nicos Poulantzas Institute, founded in Athens in 1997—an organization he has called “the intellectual and research arm of the party.”[[32]](#footnote-32) Most notably, within the past year the most prominent invocation of Poulantzas has come from Stathis Kouvelakis, a professor of political theory at Kings College London and now-former Syriza MP and current member of Popular Unity. In the days before the January 2015 elections, Kouvelakis had claimed that in Syriza “we see a confirmation of the attitude of Gramscian-Poulantzian option, of seizing power by elections, but combining that with social mobilisations, and breaking with the notion of a dual power as an insurrectionary attack on the state from the outside—the state has to seized from the inside and from the outside, from above and from below.”[[33]](#footnote-33) In Poulantzian fashion, Kouvelakis had also warned against the absorption of Syriza by the state, given the weakness of the Greek trade union movement and the absence of counter-hegemonic blocs in civil society, all of which pointed to the risk of the party leadership increasingly distancing itself from the mass movements that brought it to power. Indeed, as it had become increasingly apparent last year, the tension between the struggle within the institutions of the state and the struggle outside of it was difficult, if not impossible, to maintain.

Shortly after Syriza’s coming to power, observers such as Alex Callinicos expressed criticism of this Gramscian-Poulantzian strategy.[[34]](#footnote-34) The dialogue between Kouvelakis and Callinicos can essentially be read as a repeat of the debates about the viability of Eurocommunism that had occurred during the late 1970s. Echoing Henri Weber’s objections to Poulantzas that he underestimated the degree to which the state would shift to the right in response to the dual struggle, Callinicos suggested that this was the real danger had Syriza attempted any radical reforms. Absent a mobilization of the masses and the development of dual power, the so-called “deep state” composed of the army, the police, and the intelligence services, all with links to far Right organizations like Golden Dawn, would prevent any meaningful struggle on the terrain of the state.

But while Syriza for the time being has managed to avoid the backlash of entrenched interests within the state (this backlash instead emanating from the supra-national rather than national level), the party had also embarked upon a trend of internal bureaucratization and detachment from the popular power that it claimed to represent. Syriza’s transformation between 2009 and 2015 from an opposition movement to a unified party has been characterized by what Left-critics like Kouvelakis have called it becoming a “catch all” party run from the top-down by moderates like Tsipras.[[35]](#footnote-35) Indeed, it has been noted that despite it drawing upon the mobilized Greek public sphere over the course of the last two years, Syriza is not quite a grassroots movement.[[36]](#footnote-36) In 2012 Antonis Davanellos, a leader in the Internationalist Workers Left (DEA), a Trotskyist group that participated in the 2004 founding of Syriza, observed that its electoral success at the time was based on organization into local committees, the support of rank-and-file union workers in the factories, and the public participation it was able to draw to its open (not members-only) general assemblies.[[37]](#footnote-37) Yet although the party’s political resolution at its first congress in 2013 called for “the active intervention of an already existing mass and militant socio-political movement of democratic subversion,” this increasingly proved not to be the way that its politics were conducted.[[38]](#footnote-38) Since approximately 2012 there had been a decrease of popular mobilizations among the Greek public in the forms of mass strikes and demonstrations that had been occurring in years past, in favor of a more passive participation in electoral politics and a more autonomous party leadership.[[39]](#footnote-39) Thus, it has been suggested that Syriza’s major problem was that it was a party without a corresponding political movement, thereby leaving major decisions in the hands of inner circles once the popular energies of 2009-2011 had dissipated.[[40]](#footnote-40) In this, the party’s political strategy has largely been at odds with the dual strategy involving mass mobilizations and participatory democracy that were envisioned by Poulantzas.

Upon coming to power in January 2015, the party expressed an agenda of reform, initially reflected in its Thessaloniki Programme of 2014, a neo-Keynesian document which focused on rebuilding a meritocratic welfare state and empowering direct democratic institutions.[[41]](#footnote-41) In one of his first addresses to Parliament in February 2015, Tsipras called for a radical reform of the current “state of patronage and financial waste.”[[42]](#footnote-42) Envisioning “the greatest institutional reconstruction in the country’s history,” he spoke of curbing tax evasion, reforming the tax system by shifting the burden to high incomes, strengthening the bargaining power of workers and increasing the minimum wage, ending immunity to the Bank of Greece and other financial institutions, and of “breaking the triangle of the corrupted relationship between the banks, the political system and the media establishment.” The motto of this institutional reconstruction would be “Democracy Everywhere,” promising a commitment to “restoring and deepening every democratic institution, every social established right” including individual rights and civil liberties, extending protections of citizenship to children of immigrants, and reforming the police force. Of course, all reforms would be contingent upon a “new social contract with Europe” reflecting a more lenient fiscal policy on the part of the EU institutions, and it was this question that also exacerbated the old intra-party tensions between the Eurocommunist and the radical wings.

From the beginning Syriza was divided into two major tendencies, a centrist majority around Tsipras and the “Left Platform,” which later broke off from the party in July-August 2015 to form Popular Unity in opposition to Tsipras’ acceptance of the EU’s austerity memorandum. Yet these tensions between the moderate pro-European and left-Eurosceptic wings of the party were not merely the immediate results of negotiations with the EU, but the product of a deeper ideological rift. This rift was between the right-Eurocommunism of early-1990s Synaspismos which made up the basis of Syriza in the early 2000s, and anti-EU alter-globalization currents and trade unions that joined into the movement in the mid-late 2000s.[[43]](#footnote-43) The Synaspismos current had always been more insistent on remaining within the orbit of the EU, renegotiating the debt but not defaulting and exiting from the Eurozone.[[44]](#footnote-44) Proponents of exiting the Euro like Costas Lapavitsas, a professor of economics at LSE and then-MP, had suggested that there was no realistic middle way between the acceptance of austerity or an exit from the Eurozone; a “simple change in politics,” as he put it, was not enough to overturn the institutional mechanisms of the EU and the impossible logic of the monetary union.[[45]](#footnote-45) Yet Lapavitsas’ voice proved to be in the minority. As an anonymous MP explained to journalist Paul Mason back in 2012, “SYRIZA is a responsible political force, it’s in favour of a new paradigm without rejecting the Euro. What SYRIZA is rejecting is the actual monetary policy of the Eurozone; we want to reform the ECB.”[[46]](#footnote-46)

Thus, it has been noted that both the Thessaloniki Programme of 2014 and the subsequent actions of the party in power had abandoned its anti-capitalist goals of wealth redistribution and the nationalization of banks in place of a more conciliatory language of growth and the reconstruction of the national economy.[[47]](#footnote-47) While Tsipras increasingly invoked the language of “popular sovereignty” and “democracy” against technocracy and bureaucratic EU elites, the most prominent exercise of the democratic voice of the people during this period—the July 5, 2015 referendum on the new terms of agreement—was interpreted and channeled by the party leadership into a disastrous outcome that resulted in the defection of its left wing. Although polls showed a majority of Greeks indeed did not want to leave the Euro, the very meaning of the No vote was from the beginning controlled by Tsipras, as he consistently emphasized that a No should stand only for a rejection of the bailout terms, and not of the Euro as a currency. Upon calling for the vote, Tsipras insisted that “Any attempt for this referendum to be converted from a referendum to reject the new Memorandum to a referendum on the country’s currency serves to undermine the democratic process itself.”[[48]](#footnote-48) Following the referendum, Tsipras maintained this interpretation in the process of negotiations, as an additional sign of Greece’s commitment to the European project rather than as a break from it. As he said in a speech to the Greek Parliament, “the Greek people made a tough, brave and historic decision that surprised many. They rejected the ultimatum. *They did not grant a mandate for rupture.* Their mandate sought to strengthen the negotiating effort for an economically viable agreement;” thus, the referendum was a move beyond divisions “to political and national unity.”[[49]](#footnote-49)

National unity has certainly been one aspect of the mobilizing discourse used by Syriza within the past year, which had frequently invoked historical events such as the Greek Civil War as a way of coalescing popular opinion against the EU. In a debate with Balibar concerning Syriza’s then-negotiations with the EU, Kouvelakis had expressed hope that that “the national” could become “a terrain of struggle that progressive forces have managed to hegemonise,” in contrast to the invocation of an imagined European demos and “a supposedly already-existing and unmediated ‘European’ or ‘transnational’ terrain.”[[50]](#footnote-50) However, the process of conducting an anti-capitalist struggle on the national terrain of the state—even one where what began as an economic crisis quickly became a political crisis—was from the beginning highly limited by the supranational character of the Eurozone, and the structural constraints that participation in the Euro had imposed on the country. Tsipras’ July referendum, an attempt to mobilize and channel the democratic power and popular sovereignty most immediately available on the strategic terrain of the nation-state against the bureaucratic power of the EU, thus effectively became perceived as the opposite: a violation of that same sovereignty in the name of “responsible” governance.

Much as was the case during the late 1970s, when Eurocommunist parties responded to the international character of the economic crisis by downplaying the ruptural side of the dual strategy in favor of a closer linkage with the nation state, Syriza was a nationally-oriented party facing a problem of an international magnitude. Poulantzas, in *Classes in Contemporary Capitalism*, had observed that the intensifying globalization of capital had not made the nation-state irrelevant but had modified its role. The terrain on which the state had to maintain a general cohesion and equilibrium of class forces became increasingly complex and riven with contradictions as the international imperialist rivalry, in the context of American postwar hegemony, became interwoven with domestic social formations.[[51]](#footnote-51) In the case of Syriza, the international dimension in the form of the monetary union had constrained it between the dual push of a mobilized civil society opposed to the terms of austerity, and the unbending rationale of the EU institutions, between which there was no middle road. In retrospect, it increasingly appears that the Syriza leadership was too committed to the idea of a European Union to consider Grexit as a serious option. Lacking a EU-wide wave of solidarity, the party swung toward a statist-governance option rather than toward a stance of opposition to austerity on which it had been elected. The result was a Left-populist party at the head of a paralyzed state apparatus calling upon the nation as a means of leveraging support against transnational institutions.

V. Left in Austerity

The difficulties of Syriza’s first year in power, including the transition from a coalition-based opposition movement to a “responsible” party of governance, were exacerbated by the external constraints of the Eurozone. The momentous political realignment among Greek parties since 2010 had created a crisis of legitimacy, leaving the political scene open for the emergence of a new party with a radical Left-populist message and the benefit of not having been associated with the now-discredited establishment parties. [[52]](#footnote-52) Syriza’s success in the crucial period between 2012-2015 had more to do with the rapid collapse of the forty-year political compromise in post-junta Greece, rather than its successful pursuit of the Gramscian-Poulantzian strategy of a ruptural democratic road to socialism. As mentioned at the beginning, however, we should be careful not to use Syriza’s example to dismiss Poulantzas’ insights on the capitalist state and on the qualitative changes of anti-capitalist struggles in the West, as contemporary critics have occasionally done. The possibility of a democratic road to socialism is not invalidated simply because of the difficulties involved instead, the Syriza example makes it even more important to focus on the contradictory aspects of the relation between the state and capitalism in the context of the EU project as it stands today.

In part, these contradictions were inscribed in Syriza itself. The tension between the pro-European and Eurosceptic wings of the party, themselves a remainder of the debates from previous generations, were never successfully resolved until the decisive split and formation of Popular Unity to Syriza’s left. In addition, the structural constraints of the single currency and the peripheral position of Greece in relation to the European core stymied Syriza’s vision of a new and different European Union. This in turn was reflected in its domestic strategy, where the closer the party came to forming a government, the larger the gap grew between its moderate leadership and more radical base. Syriza’s travails in power represent a contemporary example of a problem that had long vexed the Left in advanced capitalist societies—that of mediating between a strategy of participation in the parliamentary arena and a mobilization of popular power. Essentially, Syriza fell into what Miliband had cautioned Eurcommunists from embracing: the “enhanced Statism and ‘officialisation’ of political life” that results from an inability to mediate between state power and popular power.[[53]](#footnote-53) Clearly, if the goal of both the Eurocommunist parties of the 1970s and today’s anti-austerity populist parties was to simultaneously act as parties of government and parties of struggle, this involves a delicate balancing act in the best of times—even without factoring in other considerations such as the historical circumstances in which they find themselves.

However, it is also in these conjunctural moments that existing structural relations can shift, giving rise to new forms and strategies of political organization. These real developments condition the forms of theoretical and political resistances that they encounter. The rise and failure of Eurocommunism took place at a historical moment when the radical Left was in search of a new direction and attempting to trek a middle road between Soviet Communism and Western capitalism—a repressive global power on the brink of stagnation, and a crisis-ridden economic/political order that would reinvent itself into the contemporary neoliberal model. However, today’s diverse Western Left has also largely moved beyond the need to grapple with the Soviet legacy, which weighed over it like a nightmare between 1945 and 1989. Today other anti-austerity parties within the EU that emerged in the wake of the 2007-08 global recession, most notably Podemos in Spain, face a similar challenge to Syriza. If the current circumstances persist, they are unlikely to be any more successful. However, the fact that such mobilizations are occurring on the European periphery is one sign that current arrangements are precarious. Now it seems the urgent task is to articulate a new vision and strategy of moving beyond neoliberal austerity, an inclusive and democratic form of socialism that is capable of leveraging popular power against the entrenchment of capital.

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