Marxist Theory and the Greek Crisis

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On the 21st of October, 2015, the first of a lecture series on Contemporary Marxist Theory was held at King's College. The session was titled "Lessons of the Greek Crisis", given by Stathis Kouvelakis, a Reader in Political Theory and Philosophy, former member of the central committee of Syriza and founding member of the party Popular Unity.

The lecture was organized around three central defeats suffered in the ongoing Greek crisis. However, Kouvelakis noted how each defeat carried within it further questions, a set of theses that can inspire sociological inquiry.

1) A Defeat in the Struggle Against Austerity:

There is no question that the third memorandum now being implemented by Syriza, the party voted in by the Greek people to oppose austerity, is harsher than the two that have preceded it. And there is no single source to blame, but rather a fluid alliance of organizations that change their affiliations through time and space. For example, while many would look to the Troika (the group composed of the European Commission, the European Central Bank and the International Monetary Fund), one cannot argue that they act in ideological unison. The IMF clearly edited its stance in the run-up to the Referendum (when Greeks historically voted 61.31% against austerity). As the actors that have worked to push for, draft, and implement austerity are varied, Kouvelakis noted how Greeks in Greece refer to this moment in time – characterized by a shifting political terrain – as the period of the Memorandum, assigning political agency to an agreement. **How does an object come to be assigned political agency?** If the Greek people themselves cannot locate an actor which is expressing the class interests of a minority, **in what ways are class interests expressed and implemented in a political terrain marked by changing alliances?**

Austerity, a term that has risen in popularity since the financial crisis of 2008, is really nothing new. Kouvelakis correctly pointed out that 'structural adjustment' has been used by the IMF to justify austerity since the 1950s. However, what *is* new is a shifting political geography between core and peripheral countries (to speak in the language of World Systems Theory). What we are seeing in Greece is the treatment that has historically been reserved for peripheral countries, **can we speak of a changing geography between core and periphery?** The socio-historical force of austerity could be a way to identify a reorganization of the world system.

Kouvelakis also spoke to the shock he felt as Syriza capitulated, giving his experience of being interviewed on Greek television with his fellow Syriza colleagues, who in a period of weeks, had radically changed their talking points to now support and legitimize the Memorandum. While the

cleavage was originally cast as being between transnational versus national actors (the transnational Troika and the national representative of the Greek people Syriza), a capitulation and ideological reorganization of Syriza should point to questions of **how does power manifest in varying degrees of scale, and what are the relationships between them?**

Addressing the way in which the Greek people were being framed in speeches by the leaders of core European countries, Kouvelakis asked **how is the consent of European populations manufactured by European leaders in core countries to support austerity?** A process of stigmatization is at play; it's not difficult to find someone on the streets of London who speaks of 'lazy Greeks.'

2) A Defeat of Left-Europeanism:

Syriza, a coalition of the radical left, has stressed since its January 2015 electoral victory that it is a pro-European party. While many outside Greece used Grexit as a threat to force Syriza's hand towards capitulation, Prime Minister Alexis Tsipras and various members of the party have consistently expressed their desire to cooperate and remain in the EU. This is the main reason why the Communist Party of Greece (KKE), while commanding enough votes to create a comfortable governing majority for the left, had never agreed to join the party or serve with Syriza in a coalition government.

Syriza's position is part of a philosophy that has been termed Left Europeanism – a belief that left wing parties can reform neoliberal institutions of the European Union from the inside. Kouvelakis argued that Syriza's defeat should be seen alongside a defeat in Left Europeanism, a point of view with devastating consequences for Syriza's Left European counterparts such as Podemos in Spain. If this is the case, **what are the mechanisms in place within European institutions that prevent, discourage, or co-opt social movements? What is the meaning of citizenship, of democracy, within polities that are not responsive to citizens?**

3) A Defeat of the Party Form:

Lastly, Kouvelakis spoke of the defeat of the party form. He described the way that the internal workings of Syriza were morphed as they won power and during negotiations with the Institutions. In his account, certain circles formed within the party leadership that included the most right-wing elements of the party; namely, the economists. While Syriza was originally conceived as a broad coalition of left wing parties within the Greek political system as well as in Greek civil society, the diversity that fueled the rise of Syriza succumbed to a cult of personality being formed around Tsipras. Certain sections of the ruling faction were able to disconnect themselves from party protocol, and ultimately were able to purge those who disagreed with how they handled the situation. Kouvelakis blames this on the qualitative change that took place as Syriza evolved from a social movement into an electoral machine. **What is the dialectic between content and form in regards to political parties and electoral systems?** As Syriza is a social movement that combines – and credits its success on – forms of horizontalist (soup kitchens, occupations, consensus) and verticalist (the political party, hierarchical decision making) organization, **what is the relationship between social movements and political parties?**

October 30th, 2015 | Current Events, Sociology Events | 1 Comment