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Greek left

# The Other Greek Left

- Debate - Building new parties of the left -

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**Perhaps aside from Argentina, Greece has the world's biggest and most diverse anticapitalist left – the product of decades of splits and rich anarchist and communist traditions. In contrast to the fragmentation and infighting predominant almost everywhere else, Greece is also one of the few countries in which most of these forces have succeeded in constructing a durable front of collaboration and activity, the Front of the Anticapitalist Left (Antarsya).**

**Although microscopic at an electoral level – and totally overshadowed in this domain by Syriza and the Communist Party (KKE) – Antarsya has real social roots and plays a crucial mobilizing and organizing role in a range of social movements. Here, Sebastian Budgen [for *Jacobin* online magazine] explores this complex and fascinating landscape with the scholar, activist, and leading figure of Antarsya, Panagiotis Sotiris.**

**Maybe we can start with some personal questions about your background and your politicization, and the different phases of that, as a beginning.**

I was born in 1970, and I was politicized first in the student movement in the second half of the 1980s. I entered the University of Athens in 1987, in the department of philosophy, psychology, and pedagogy. Although I had been active in high-school mobilizations, I was mainly politicized into what was called at that time the “left regroupments of students” (Aristeres Syspeiroseis Foititon), which was a network of radical, anticapitalist, independent, leftist groups in universities that was the result of the evolution of the various traditions of the revolutionary left within universities.

In that period, in the second half of the 1980s, this was one of the main venues of intervention for whatever was left, at that time, of the revolutionary left in Greece. Out of this experience came, in the early 1990s, a political group also called “Left Regroupments” (Aristes Syspeiroseis), which would later become part of “Left Recomposition” (Aristeri Anasynthesi – ARAN). As a student, I took part in all the big battles of the student movement in the second half of the 1980s and the beginning of the 1990s, and was a member of the Central Council of the National Union of Students (EFEE)

In the autumn of 1989, there was a big split in the Communist Youth and the Communist Party as a result of opposition to the right-wing turn of the Communist Party of Greece. This led to the creation of New Left Current (NAR). This gave a new breath to the anti-capitalist left in Greece, since it created an important fusion between the traditions of the revolutionary left and of the communist movement.

It also led to a series of very important political experiments, some of which are also relevant today. Of particular importance was the creation of EAAK (United Independent Left Movement) in the universities. EAAK was born out of the massive high school and university movement of the winter of 1990–91 and has been the backbone – or at least, part of the backbone – of the student movement in Greece for the past twenty-five years.

In the early 1990s, this influx of comrades from the communist tradition also helped a series of initiatives in the trade-union movement, which took the form of radical left groups and currents within unions and federations, and initiatives for new unions. This was rather important, first in the public sector but also, after the end of the 1990s, in the initiatives for new forms of rank-and-file militant unionism in the private sector in Greece, especially in sectors of flexible and precarious employment.

Moreover, the anticapitalist left in that period was to play a major role in important battles, such as the mass movement in 1998 against the introduction of a new entry exam for primary and secondary education teachers.

After getting my BA in 1993 and finishing my PhD in 1999, I was part of these kinds of initiatives. I was involved for many years in the union of teachers of tutorial schools in Athens, and I was president of it from 2005 to 2007.

Tutorial schools (*frontistiria*) are private institutions preparing students for the university entrance exams. They are the result of the deficiencies of the formal education system and represent a form of direct commercialization of education. Teachers are not well paid and face precariousness. Consequently, we had many struggles in order to establish and implement a contract, and at the same time, defend our dignity as educators.

After 2005, I also started working as an adjunct lecturer and became involved in university union politics until. I was the vice president of the Union of Teachers of the University of the Aegean and in 2013–14 a member of the steering committee and, for some time the executive of the Federation of Greek University Teachers. This is my personal union background.

### **And your PhD?**

I wrote my PhD in the second half of the 1990s on the work of Louis Althusser. It was centered on Althusser's conception of philosophy and on the evolution of the definitions of philosophy within the work of Althusser. This came from a particular interest in Althusser but also, I have to admit, from the particular influence of Althusser in the Greek left.

**Which we'll come to in a minute. So your political origins, then, are not either in the Communist Party or in the Eurocommunist party, so give us a quick sketch of the non-Communist, or non-Eurocommunist, Greek left since the Second World War.**

Well, I do consider myself to come also from a communist tradition, although I've never been a member of the Communist Party or the Communist Party of the Interior.

The revolutionary left in Greece has a rather long history. Not only the Trotskyist movement in Greece has a long history, which dates back to the 1920s, but also the Maoist or Marxist-Leninist traditions in Greece also have deep roots.

In Greece, the Marxist-Leninist or Maoist current did not start in the 1960s as in most European countries, but in 1956. In Greece, the turn in the international communist movement after the death of Stalin took the form of rather violent right-wing intervention on the part of the Soviet Union (and the other "brother parties") inside the Greek party, which led to the expulsion of Nicos Zachariades, the leader of the KKE during the period of the Civil War, and the imposition of a new leadership.

Although it was inscribed into the de-Stalinization process, for many militants, especially political refugees in the Eastern Bloc, former fighters of the Democratic Army, it was felt to be a right-wing turn. Although their positions, in the beginning, and in their particular context, seemed like a Stalinist approach in terms of nominal references, in fact it was a search for a more left-wing politics from the communist movement.

This was also the position of some political prisoners in Greece, including the position of an important segment of the political prisoners in AÃ Stratis, one of the islands that were used as detention centers for political prisoners.

In the early 1960s, as part of an important wave of political mobilization and radicalization that preceded the 1967 dictatorship, this kind of criticism of Communist Party politics also inspired students and militants in Greece. At that point, in the 1960s, it also came under the influence the Chinese Communists' critique of Soviet "revisionism" and led to the emergence of the particular strain of Greek Maoism. However, I have to stress that this historical rooting in the traditions of the Greek communist movement gave a particular identity and sense of mass politics to the Greek Marxist-Leninist or Maoist movement.

The 1967–1974 dictatorship was a big catalyst for the revolutionary left in Greece. It was a period of radicalization, with many militants either in Greece or in political exile or in Western Europe coming into contact with other currents – Trotskyist, Maoist, or Guevarist (the latter position more popular with those who were involved in forms of armed resistance against the dictatorship).

The encounter with the experiences of the post-1968 revolutionary left in West Europe was also crucial. It was also a period of questioning the line of the Communist Party and its inability to avoid another wave of repression, less than twenty years after the defeat in the Civil War.

The symbolic moment of the emergence of the revolutionary left as an important segment of the Left was the occupation of the National Polytechnic in Athens in November 1973 and the anti-junta uprising of the students, and its violent and bloody repression from the dictatorship. The revolutionary left played an active role in this and wholeheartedly promoted the idea of the occupation, and played a role in its politicization and radicalization and the ways it became not simply a pro-democracy mobilization but also a demand for a rupture with the entire post-Civil War system of power and the role of US imperialism in Greece.

In the uprising, for the first time to such an extent, a difference in tactics was evident in regards to more reformist positions (the leaderships of both the Communist Party and the Communist Party of the Interior considered the uprising to be somewhat immature). Of course, this is not to deny the contribution to the uprising and the heroism of many militants from the Communist Party and the Communist Party of the Interior.

After the fall of the dictatorship in 1974, you have a flourishing of the revolutionary left, which of course in terms of scale was impressive, but at the same time you have an even more impressive flourishing of the reformist left, in particular the youth of the Communist Party. This is also the period of the emergence of Pasok, which in certain aspects adopted a more radical rhetoric in comparison to the reformist Communist left.

In the first years, in the revolutionary left, you tend to have an obsession with party building: you had two major Maoist parties, other Maoist organizations, and also Trotskyist organizations. This kind of traditional party politics and the logic of building the group or the party came to a crisis towards the end of the 1970s because of the lack of a coherent strategy.

In a certain way, this kind of radical politics on the part of the revolutionary Left was militant but at the same time not very ideologically advanced, mainly centered around a traditional anti-imperialism. In certain aspects, it also seemed like a radicalized version of what the Communist Party said. As such, it was also part of a broader crisis of strategy of the Greek communist movement, especially since in the end of the 1970s it had become obvious that the communist left in all its variants had lost the battle for hegemony to Pasok.

Pasok managed to express exactly this logic of democratic, socialist-reformist kind of change. "Change" was indeed the main political slogan of Pasok in the 1981 election. The communist left had accepted the hegemony of this kind of reformist politics, and this went for both the KKE and the Communist Party of the Interior, despite their efforts to distance themselves from Pasok.

They had accepted a subaltern position, which was symbolized by the Communist Party slogan in the 1981 election: whereas the slogan of Pasok was “change,” the slogan of the KKE was “real change” or “there can be no change without the KKE,” which actually was an acceptance that they could not offer a strategic alternative.

So in the period of the end of the 1970s, most groups of the revolutionary left went through a phase of crisis with people questioning the ideology, questioning that kind of obsessive militancy, questioning the inability to come to terms with a new reality.

In that period, there was also another catalyst, which was the split, very important in terms of ideological repercussions, in the youth of the Communist Party of the Interior.

**Okay, before we go to that, let’s move back a bit, because you talked about the development of the Maoist current. The Anglophone readers probably don’t know the development of Greek Trotskyism, so if you could just briefly sketch that out as well.**

Well, Greek Trotskyism, for many years after the Civil War it led a rather clandestine existence because they were also considered to be subversive communists. They were mainly associated with the Secretariat of the Fourth International. This was the main current after the implosion of archeiomarxism, exemplified in its support of the “national government” at the end of the Civil War and the dismantling of archeiomarxism as a current.

Archeiomarxism at the beginning, in the 1920s, was a highly original kind of phenomenon in the Greek left — a strange mixture of Leninism with a pre-Leninist kind of emphasis on education — which challenged the Communist Party in certain unions and later was associated with the Left Opposition. In Greece, the Left Opposition was formed on the one hand by people coming from the Communist Party, which included important leading figures with considerable theoretical and political contributions, such as Pantelis Pouliopoulos and Serapheim Maximos, and on the other hand you have the archeiomarxism.

The Second World War was also a testing ground for Greek Trotskyism. Some currents took part in the Resistance against the occupation, others adopted a more defeatist position such as the group led by Stinas, which at that period was also the political mentor of Castoriadis.

In the 1960s and during the dictatorship, there was again a flourishing of Greek Trotskyism although never again on the scale or magnitude of the Maoist current. For that period, especially in the 1970s, the Maoist groups were much, much bigger — we’re talking about groups that had thousands of members.

There was OKDE, associated with the Secretariat of the Fourth International. There was, after the dictatorship, the emergence of a group associated with the Healyite tendency, led by Savvas Michail-Matsas, who in the 1980s distanced himself from Gerry Healy and is highly respected both for his militancy and his theoretical work.

Comrades who were part of the anti-dictatorship movement formed during the dictatorship Socialist Revolution, later to be called Organization Socialist Revolution (OSE), associated with the International Socialist Tendency (IST), renamed after 1991, the Socialist Workers Party (SEK).

**That was originally a soft Maoist movement, no?**

The first form of the OSE was more of a hybrid, with strong anti-imperialist elements. However, this was part of the broader culture of the Greek revolutionary left at that time, with a very strong anti-Americanism prevailing.

They were also part of the radical anti-dictatorship student movement and later of the post-dictatorship student movement. In that period, the student movement in Greece was also was the big laboratory of the Greek left, and you can see it in the trajectories of the people associated with the student movement from then until now. The leading figures of the student left marked the history of the Left for many years to come, both positively and negatively.

**Okay, so getting back to the late '70s, early '80s, all of these groups, Maoist and Trotskyist . . .**

Here is the importance of the split in the youth of the Eurocommunist party, or the Communist Party of the Interior. The Communist Party of the Interior, which was the result of the 1968 split in the KKE, started as the expression of a desire for an actual renewal of communist strategy. It had the support of many militants, especially the militants inside Greece, against the rather sclerotic line of the party apparat, in political exile in Romania and the Soviet Union.

Although it attracted the best elements, at the same time it was marked from the very beginning by a certain right-wing position. There were certain moments during the period of the dictatorship when decisive right-wing turns were made.

However, after the fall of the dictatorship, they represented a call for the renewal of communist strategy. This was evident in the support the Communist Party of the Interior had in intellectual circles. Most of the well-known and respected Marxist scholars in Greece in the 1970s, were, one way or another, members of the Communist Party of the Interior.

At the same time, it had an even more reformist line than the Communist Party. However, the youth of the Communist Party of the Interior, which had deep roots in the student movement against the dictatorship, was also much more radical. After the disastrous electoral results of 1977, when it was made evident that the Communist Party had much more power electorally than the Communist Party of the Interior, there was a split in the youth of the Communist Party of the Interior in 1978.

The group that came out of this split was called EKON "Rigas Feraios" – B' Panelladiki (Second Pan-Greek Conference – the Conference of the Split) or simply, B' Panelladiki. This was an important group. It was radical, it was anticapitalist, it was influenced by Althusser and Poulantzas, and it was the first current of the revolutionary left that transcended the traditional economic anti-imperialism of the communist tradition in Greece.

This coincided with a new wave of radicalism in the late 1970s in the student movement; it was important. Some of the people associated with it are still playing a very crucial role in various currents of the Left afterwards. For example, John Milios, a well-known Marxist scholar and the former chief economist of Syriza (and a critic of the negotiation tactics of the current government), was part of the leadership of B' Panelladiki.

**So this was a big split? How many people, roughly?**

I don't know the numbers, actually. B' Panelladiki didn't actually take the form of a classical rigid organization. It also had a rather short lifespan, it was dissolved after the elections of 1981. However, it left a very defining mark on the Greek left, especially the student and intellectual left.

In 1981, we have the election of Pasok on a rather radical social-democratic program. It implemented a series of important progressive reforms in the beginning, but, at the same time, it was obvious that it represented not a socialist strategy but a strategy for capitalist modernization. This conjuncture created a very big crisis especially in the revolutionary left. The big Maoist groups dissolved; they had all started suffering a series of splits or problems or

open debates after the late 1970s.

### **Linked to the evolution of China, or internally generated?**

Not mainly sinocentric, although the right-wing turn in China after the death of Mao surely reduced its appeal as an actual alternative to the Soviet Union. However, the crisis of Greek Maoism was linked more to the inability to have a strategy that could really sound relevant to an entire generation of militants.

When their main slogans and demands were a demand for democracy and basic democratic reforms and a break from the United States and then you have a social-democratic government, which is advancing some basic democratic reforms but also promotes capitalist modernization, this creates a strategic impasse.

People were tired of their former militancy – they were saying, “Well, why not, let’s see.” There was also a turn from the political towards the private, in the sense of finishing long-delayed university studies, getting jobs, finding possibilities for careers. Pasok opened the state apparatus, and there were also some opportunities for a career in the private sector. This created a very big crisis.

Is this on the same scale of recuperation of the revolutionary left as what happened in France under Mitterrand?

Well I think there are many common elements. Usually when we discuss this question, we tend to think of the leading figures that actually took very different positions: people from the revolutionary left later became very cynical power brokers within Pasok, or journalists in the systemic mass media, or made careers in the private sector.

However, most of the militants of the 1970s revolutionary left completed their studies, started working and for many years they carried the distinctive traits of their erstwhile militancy. For example in secondary education, they would be the really progressive teachers who would be part of the union, ready to support a struggle, or the doctor in a university that was more supportive of patients. Most of them did not follow some sort of organized politics.

But then you could have figures like Chrysanthos Lazaridis, one of Samara’s closest collaborators who started as a leading figure in B’ Panelladiki, before making a political turn in the 1980s and become associated with nationalist circles.

### **A Lucio Colletti–type case?**

It was an even more impressive political turn. He even attempted to say, “Because I was that then, that’s why I’m this kind of right-winger now.”

In sum, the revolutionary left was in a crisis in the 1980s. The big organizations were not there or whatever was left of them were small groups, either Maoist or Trotskyist groups.

Some others have turned themselves towards ecology. Some of these groups were part of the left student regroupments (Aristeres Syspeiroseis Foititon) that first formed after the 1979 student movement. For some years in the 1980s, this was the main outlet for the exchange of ideas and politicization on the revolutionary left.

It was only after the early 1990s, the fusion, the insertion of all these people coming from the communist tradition, the new wave of student struggles and the beginning of work in the second half of the 1990s in trade unions, which

created new generations of militants for the revolutionary left.

In the 2000s there was also a very big influx both from students, especially through the very big student movement of 2006 and 2007, in which EAAK played a leading role. This was also a catalytic period of mass politicization again. 2008, the December 2008 massive explosion of the Greek youth, was also an important catalytic moment – not only for the anticapitalist left but also for Syriza and of course the anarchist/autonomous groups.

### **Can you say a bit more about EAAK?**

EAAK: it is the name of all the radical groups in universities. They have a rather strong part of the student vote, let's say more than 10 percent of the student vote (13 percent in the 2014 student election). And they always get better results in the elections of student unions than the youth of Syriza.

### **Are all the revolutionary groups part of that?**

Not all of them, most of them. Let's say at least now, at this period, this includes mostly all the groups associated with Antarsya. But they are a very important part of the student movement.

### **Okay, so the important thing you're saying really is that in the 1990s there was already the beginning of a tradition of cooperation between different revolutionary left organizations?**

Yes, and this was mainly an experience that came from the student movement and also from other initiatives in the trade-union movement. There was what we call in Greece a "frontist" kind of mentality – that is, that there should be venues for political coordination and common action and ways to bridge differences.

Naturally, at the same time, it is a rather contradictory process, which took various forms, but it was this element that was important as a political culture, which would later find its expression in initiatives such as Antarsya.

Of course, not all the revolutionary groups were part of this tradition. For example, for many years, SEK, the Socialist Workers Party, had a rather solitary trajectory around its own initiatives, its own expressions in the student and trade unions. It was only after the second half of the 2000s that we started cooperating with the militants from SEK. Some of the other groups, such as some Maoist groups, stayed out of this kind of process.

**But how do you explain this? Because in other countries there have been strong student movements which haven't led to cooperation between different left organizations. In fact, there is often increasing competition between them. And in the specifically Greek context, it is not one that would encourage, judged from the abstract, cooperation rather than competition because of the long and bloody histories and because of the strong ideological differences.**

**How do you explain that in Greece, it's kind of a very exceptional case, isn't it? On an international level, even in a period of not great advance, it is able to learn to cooperate together.**

This has to do with a particular dynamic of the student movement. The student movement in Greece, is a movement that in almost all its battles until the memoranda period and the period after 2010, was actually rather victorious. It was always a politicized movement. There was always a political interest in the elections for student unions, which were held on the same day, and the different tickets in the union were expressions of the national political parties.

Each current, each party had its own particular expression. And the results of the student elections still make headlines.

Consequently, you had this combination of a strong student movement, big battles, strong student unions with a tradition of radical political presence in many of them. Moreover, it was a unified student movement. There were no differences in statuses in different unions. Until the mid 1990s, there were very big battles around what would happen at the congresses of the National Union of Students (EFEE).

Inside the history of the student movement, of particular importance was the 1979 movement of mass occupations, a victorious movement that forced the government to repeal a law that had been approved one year earlier.

From there you have the idea of the coordinating committee of the student occupation that could also become a radical student group. In the 1980s this remained a very strong tradition, that this was the way to do things, creating groups that represented a unity of different tendencies.

When we had the split in the 1989 in the Communist Youth, which coincided with the very big student movement of 1990–91, this tradition was instrumental in the formation of EAAK. You had all these people working together for months, occupying a school, creating a common political culture. Consequently, this model of a unitary network of groups in universities, which comprised various tendencies, became a defining element of the culture of the Greek anticapitalist left.

When, in the 1990s, people started working in trade unions, for example in primary and secondary education unions, or in hospital unions, this common experience became crucial. You had these militants and activists who wanted to work within a union, thought that this was how to do it: people from different currents, coming together and forming a group or initiative.

This can explain how many times you hear, which you do not hear in other countries, the name “independent left group.” If you say that in Greek, it means exactly that, this kind of different currents working together within a union. It was part of an entire political culture of the anticapitalist left.

Moreover, some of the basic currents of the Greek revolutionary left after the 1990s, at least in nominal terms would consider themselves to be transitional currents “à” that is, that they are not the nucleus of a party which just had to grow bigger and everyone else gets smaller, and this would rebuild the communist movement. This, of course, does not go for all the currents, but it left this kind of mentality for a large part of the Greek anticapitalist left.

**That’s very interesting. So does that mean also that this practice meant that there was a different kind of cultural ethos in the way different revolutionary left organizations related to each other? As you know in other countries the revolutionary left’s relations are not only ones of hostility, often very sterile polemics, and in the worst cases, poaching of members, physical violence, this kind of thing. Does that mean there is a different kind of culture about how revolutionary left organizations should relate to each other?**

Well I wouldn’t like to idealize the Greek situation. You can still find many forms of sterile polemics, etc.

**But not physical violence?**

No. There was this feeling from the 1980s onward that we are part of the same political space or the same political milieu. It is interesting, for example, this metaphoric use of the word “space”: it was common in these years to refer to

a certain political milieu because of a process of fragmentation. People said, "Well, we are part of the same political space."

Perhaps one of the contradictions of the radical anticapitalist left was that at the same time you had this sense "or realization" of a common political space and various forms of coordination and cooperation, you could see sterile polemics and inability to synthesize, for example, in what concerns electoral coalitions, very schematic oppositions which can lead to tragicomic, or plainly tragic results.

For example, I still remember the 2007 election when there was an attempt to have a common electoral ticket of the anticapitalist left. There were two initiatives, one with Left Recomposition (ARAN), SEK, OKDE, and other groups, and another called the Front of the Radical Left (MERA) " its main component was New Left Current (NAR).

We all had big discussions and massive assemblies in major cities, but in the end, we had two different tickets. If you tried to find the actual differences, you could not find any, and eight years later this kind of debate seems out of touch with reality, especially if you take into consideration the catastrophic electoral results both initiatives had. That we could not at that point manage to have a united electoral presence, in the end just helped Syriza make its first major electoral advance in 2007.

Therefore, not everything is good with the culture of the Greek left. We have our own particular pathologies and sectarianism.

**Sure, but still it seems to be way ahead of most other countries in terms of cooperation. I have two hypotheses. One is that the pressure of competition from the Communist Party forces the revolutionary left to have to bind together to have some kind of weight, whereas in other countries the Communist Party either never really existed or begins to decline very quickly in the 1980s. And the second hypothesis would be that perhaps there is no single group which is hegemonic in the revolutionary left and therefore causes the other to be satellites or absolutely hostile, as in the British situation.**

Well, it's true that if you look at the history of the revolutionary left since the 1990s you cannot say that one group or one tendency has been hegemonic. One might be more important in different aspects, at different points of the history. Of course there was the pressure in different periods of how to stand up not just to the Communist Party but also to other currents, against the union bureaucracy or against Pasok or against Syriza. In different periods you had to stand up to various pressures.

However, while there was a culture of dialogue, at the same time there was an inadequacy of major political initiatives early on too. Now, there's an important evolution in the revolutionary left that starts in the early 2000s with the groups that end up being part of Syriza. This is also another important aspect. Because in that period, after the first phase, of the 1990s, mainly to be a current of the anticapitalist left meant a turn to radical movements, to regrouping, to standing up, and of course all the fights arising out of the particular version of neoliberalism at that period which was mainly associated with the Pasok government.

Especially after 1995, when they started an aggressive process of modernization, an acceleration of neoliberal reforms, which of course ended up, unfortunately, with Greece's entrance into the eurozone. In that period, which coincides with the wave of international anti-globalization mobilization and anti-neoliberal radicalism associated with a whole series of movements in Seattle, Genoa, the European Social Forum in Florence, etc. In that period, which is an interesting period, there are various kinds of dialogues within the radical or anticapitalist left in all its forms.

It is then that we see a tendency in various forms and in various currents, which insisted that the important thing was

not mainly to recombine the radical or anticapitalist left, but to attempt instead a radical recombination of the entire left. This led to unitary initiatives that could involve reformist tendencies, such as the Greek Social Forum (which included Synaspismos), using anti-neoliberalism as a common ground.

This was also associated with various estimates regarding the inability of reformist parties, especially of post-Communist left-wing reformism, to have a strategy, and the ability of the anticapitalist left to influence them — these were the debates. For example, this was in a certain way, and I'm trying not to be unjust to them, the position of DEA, which after its split from SEK, sort of turned towards that direction.

This was also the position of other groups, of other militants that through the medium of the Greek Social Forum, which was part of the European Social Forum, in the end also ended up in the formation of Syriza in 2004. Another organization that ended up in Syriza was KOE (Communist Organization of Greece). This was a Maoist group, initially part of the radical students groups of the 1980s, that in the 1990s turned towards a rather sectarian attempt towards party building before ending up in Syriza in the second half of the 2000s.

For these currents, the choice to associate with Syriza seemed justified, especially after the very good electoral results of 2007. In that period to certain segments of the anticapitalist left it seemed like Syriza was a better venue. It was in that period that Syriza stopped being simply an extension of Synaspismos, or an evolution of a right-wing version of Eurocommunism, and also became associated with more radical elements. Some of these elements are still evident in Syriza today.

This period was also an expression of the inability of the revolutionary left, in light of the new radicalism of the 2000s, to actually articulate an alternative project. Though I have to say it did grow stronger.

In this sense you could even say that the formation of Antarsya in 2009 came a little bit too late. Of course, there was the catalyst of the youth rebellion of 2008, which forced this kind of front creation. It was so obvious that there was a common position of wholehearted acceptance and support of the movement that was different even from that of Syriza, despite the fact that Syriza had supported the movement.

However, one can even say that it came a little bit too late, for I think if we had this kind of realignment of forces from the early 2000s this would have perhaps changed a little bit of the landscape of the Left in a period which was crucial.

**Let's just make a parenthesis here, because it's clear you think the student movement is the key source of rejuvenation of the revolutionary left over several decades.**

Roughly, yes, until the 2000s. However, I must stress that from the late 1990s onwards it is also important to take into consideration the advances made in the trade-union movement. This was important.

**But let's talk about the specificity of the student movement in Greece. Specifically, the student union movement because it's probably structured differently from the rest of the world. So first of all, there is one student union federation?**

There is one union per school or department. For historical reasons some of the unions are based on schools, others on departments — the majority on departments. However, all university student unions were part of the same federation (and all technical higher education unions of the respective federation).

The federation (EFEE) has been inactive since 1997, so it's been inactive for many years, but the tendencies within

student movement are national. That is, New Democracy has a student wing which presents itself with the same name and the same political line all over. The same goes, or used to go for, the Pasok youth, the Communist Party has a similar student expression, etc.

### **So there's nothing binding together these separate unions?**

Well they don't have a formal structure as they used to have when the federation was still working, but elections are held on the same day. There is always an informal process of agreement on the day when it's going to be done.

Another aspect: although you elect the steering committee, the main decision body is the general assembly. That is the main organ of decision making. It is the assembly, for example, that decides on an occupation or strike. It is exactly the strong tradition of the assembly as the main decision process in the student union that enables the radical left to take the initiative in important student movements.

Student elections, because there is mass participation, sometimes reflect the general balance of political forces, but in student assemblies, which are usually rather massive, it's easier for the revolutionary left, at a critical moment or with new legislation, to call for an occupation or prolonged strike and introduce the winning motion in a student assembly.

### **But each one separately in each university or separate school?**

Yes, for example, regarding occupations, in each occupation, we can also use the word "strike" because when students want to go on strike, they also occupy the buildings, to make sure that no classes are offered. Yes, there are forms of coordination; for example during big student movements, we have national coordination of occupations and assemblies.

### **And the assemblies elect leaderships at the national level?**

They elect coordination committees that also represent each assembly to the national coordination. These mass meetings of the national coordination represent all the occupations, and they decide when to have the next mass rally or they issue statements and declarations.

This was very evident in the 2006–7 movement but you also see it from 1979 onwards. Because we've had big movements in 1979, 1987, 1990–91, 1992, 1995, 1997–98, 2001, 2006–7, 2008, 2011. So you can understand this, this creates a political necessity to have radical left groups in each school and department.

### **When you say "groups," what do you mean?**

It's necessary, if you want to go through this process and be able to pass the winning motion in a general assembly, to have the local EAAK group "which usually is not called EAAK, it has a different name, like Radical Left Initiative, or Radical Left Regroupment or something like that" in every university department, which will take part in the elections for the local student union, do political and organizing work, prepare for the battle of the next assembly, etc. You could not perform, you could not fare well in that environment if you just had one militant per department.

### **But when a wave of struggle takes place, it's coordinated at a national level in an ad-hoc way, is what you're saying?**

Yes, it is coordinated through the assemblies, through the representatives of the assemblies and through of course the coordination of the political currents that are hegemonic in the movement. For example, in most recent student movements the role of EAAK is always crucial, even though you can always find people in the national coordination from other groups – anarchists, quasi-anarchists, and students from Syriza. At least this was the experience until 2011, the last major student movement. In contrast, the Communist Youth has a sectarian tactic.

**So the unions themselves don't necessarily play a big role themselves in the struggles, they simply register the balance of political forces?**

No, it's not quite like that, because the steering committee that is the elected body of the student union, it is important because depending on the balance of forces you can have statements, you can have motions, you can have interventions that are necessary as long as there were student participation to governing bodies of universities, which was elected through the union.

So it was important, but not in the days of major struggles. For example at the same time, if you had a conservative steering committee for example, there were certain cases, like New Democracy, that had the controlling majority. Then of course it was much more difficult if you had this kind of blocking majority to pass a motion through the steering committee. But during a major wave of struggles you could bypass that by having the winning motion in the assembly.

However, it is important to stress that the student unions in Greece are not traditionally associated, or mainly the work of, elected officials. This was also the result of the big debate on the potential bureaucratization of the movement, which took part in the 1970s or 1980s. At the same time, regarding the student sections of systemic parties (such as New Democracy and Pasok), you could even see elements of corruption.

**And is membership to a student union obligatory?**

No, as a student, you're automatically a member of the student union, you are entitled to take part in assembly, and if you like you also go and vote, but every student can participate in the assembly, even if he or she did not vote in the student elections.

**A question on the organizational culture of the revolutionary left: are we talking about organizations that are relatively small cadre organizations which don't engage in open recruitment and which place a large emphasis on ideological training, or are we talking about looser organizations with looser recruitment policies and less focus on ideological training?**

Well I would say we have examples of both, we have all elements present, and we also have different organizational cultures. For example, traditionally the groups that came from the IST tradition, such as SEK, have this kind of recruitment tradition – a great emphasis on recruiting, and all the practices associated, with a mass presence in rallies and the selling of newspapers, etc.

Regarding other groups, you can say that although they don't have these kind of recruitment campaigns, at the same time they can use their strong presence in student unions or other trade unions in order to attract people. There is always an emphasis on ideology or discussion of ideological questions, although it is not necessary for all groups to have forms of ideological indoctrination. Again, I would say that more Trotskyist groups are more like that.

But you can see also emphasis on ideology and theory in other groups like Left Recomposition (ARAN), but also in

New Left Currents (NAR), although NAR traditionally was the group that was not associated with a historical current.

Regarding the organizational culture, I would say that it is both democratic and also more problematical depending on the group and the conjecture. No group can claim, especially now, to be rigid. Most groups, there are different tendencies, different discussions, and the different positions tend to be well known outside of each group. This kind of monolithic organization, I don't think you can say it exists.

### **Even in SEK?**

Well, SEK still gives the impression that it is rather strong, that it has a line all the members follow, but let's say there is a feeling that, even in SEK, there are debates. This is one of the good things about this kind of "frontist" politics and one of the reasons that traditionally you had tendencies opposing the formation of fronts.

Front politics necessarily means that militants' opinions are influenced not only by the group or organization they belong to, but also by the discussion within the fronts. In Antarsya you can see a more open discussion, questions traversing organizations. I think that by all means this is positive and trying to express or force monolithic unity to a group is a mistake. Being open to contradictions is the only way to transform these processes into actual discussions. Otherwise, it's just a balance of force between tendencies.

I think that this is also important on a strategic level, if we think about the processes of recomposing the radical left. The contemporary anticapitalist left is the result of various forms of crises of the workers' movement and of the revolutionary movement. At the same time, it represents the challenge and the need for a radical renewal of the communist movement.

Consequently, you can only think about the process of recomposition in terms of an open discussion and of a necessarily contradictory hegemony, and of synthesizing various experiences, sensitivities, and positions. In this sense, you need fronts exactly because they offer the possibility for this kind of process to be initiated.

Back in the 1980s, after the very big crisis of the 1970s revolutionary left, at least in some of the currents of the revolutionary left "and this is the tradition from which I come" we were thinking exactly that unitary experiments such as the left regroupments within the universities had a more strategic character. They could help this kind of recomposing of the radical left as opposed to traditional forms of organization building or party building.

I'm not saying we do not need strong organizations or that we do not need to fight for strong organizations. For example, in my view, it is very important in the Greek context to initiate a process of realignment of organizations in the sense of having a much bigger organization of communist orientation, which would also be the backbone of fronts, politics, etc.

However, you also need to think of the strategic character of front politics today. Front politics today should not be thought as necessary in the sense of if we cannot do it alone, nor should we conceive them in the sense of a main dominant group and its subaltern satellites. Fronts should not be seen as an attempt to influence the reformists or make some sort of tactical alliance with the reformists. What we need are terrains of experimentation with new political syntheses.

Fronts should be considered as places of actual dialogue, of actual ideological battle, but also synthesis and experimentation. We should not think of them in the sense of one group conquering the terrain, but in the sense of a dialogue and dialectic of hegemony between different strategic positions.

This can also be a sign of political dynamism from a front or in a broader sense a unitary initiative. If what is presented as the political line of the front is not just the median of all the different opinions, or the minimum common ground, but a higher political and strategic synthesis, then we are talking about a political front with actual political dynamism.

I am not saying we have managed that in Greece. However, Antarsya has been, at least in certain moments, something like that. We must insist in this conception of political fronts as terrains of open dialogue, experimentation, and collective elaboration of the political line. In the European context this kind of realignment and recomposition of forces is more urgent than ever.

### **Before looking at Antarsya more carefully, how would you characterize the politics of the KKE?**

The current strategy of the KKE is a mixture of sectarianism and leftist rhetoric. During the past years, the KKE has gone through a process of ideological transformation. They have abandoned their references to anti-imperialist struggles for a certain version of an anticapitalist rhetoric.

They also have changed the way they view the history of the communist movement in Greece. They have a much more critical approach to the politics of the National Liberation Front (EAM) during the German Occupation (1941–44), which they now accuse of having a policy of alliance with bourgeois parties, privileging the Civil War instead.

Their main position regarding the current crisis is that there can be no solution without the implementation of a people's power with a people's economy. That is why they accuse demands such as the exit from the eurozone as being reformist since they do not include a complete break with capitalist social relations.

They accuse Syriza of being simply a bourgeois alternative. They tend to underestimate the extent and significance of struggles since 2010, because they were not hegemonic within them. They also tend to adopt a rather third-period line regarding other forces of the Left, attacking practically everyone as being opportunist. It might sound radical but in reality it is rather conservative, in the sense that the basic line is that nothing can actually change as long as KKE is not the leading force in the Left.

**Okay, before we talk more specifically about Antarsya, let's just confirm the cartography of the Greek revolutionary left. So we have obviously, Antarsya's the main bulk of it. We also have the groups that are in Syriza, so particularly DEA and KOEâ€”**

I wouldn't say that KOE can be considered now a group of the revolutionary left. Communist Organization of Greece is an offshoot of the historical Marxist-Leninist movement, the Maoist movement in Greece, initially in the 1980s it was part of the left regroupments in universities. After the late 1990s, it started a process of organization building, rather solitary and even sectarian. It entered Syriza as a component in the mid-2000s.

Since then it has made a rather right-wing turn, exemplified in the rather symbolic abandonment of its anti-euro, anti-European Union position, saying okay, we had this position but now think different. They suffered a split around 2012, with a left wing abandoning KOE in opposition to the right-wing turn.

### **What about in Syriza, the IMT group, Communist Tendency?**

Well it is a very small group. And it was mainly built as a way to be part of Syriza â€” they did not have very much

influence or presence. I don't even remember what propositions they had before becoming the Communist Tendency.

**Okay, but then you have various bits and pieces within Syriza but you also have a whole range of groups which are neither in Syriza nor in Antarsya, leaving aside the anarchists. Are these all crazy groups, or is there any rational basis for them not being in Antarsya or Syriza?**

Well you have two Maoist, Marxist-Leninist groups: the Communist Party of Greece- (Marxist-Leninist) (KKE (m-l)), and the Marxist-Leninist Communist Party of Greece (ML-KKE), which also have formed an electoral alliance. This is a classic case of m-l identity politics in the sense that they are good militants, with both groups we have cooperated in various struggles from the past thirty years.

However, they insist that they cannot be part of a broader movement, that what is needed is the refounding of the Marxist-Leninist movement. Consequently, they are building that kind of politics. I hope that they sometime realize that this is a dead end for all.

**And these are hardcore Maoists, now?**

Yes, they are this kind of Maoist-Marxist-Leninist tradition. There is also Workers Revolutionary Party (EEK) whose most well-known figure is Savvas Michail, with which we also cooperate on various levels in various movements, but they think that the program of Antarsya is not anticapitalist and internationalist enough. There is OKDE (OKDE-Ergatiki Pali), a split from OKDE, which does consider itself to be part of the Fourth International, with positions similar to Antarsya, but an insistence on party building.

And of course there are also political currents like Plan B, led by Alekos Alavanos, the former leader of Synaspismos and Syriza, which has a strong anti-euro position. It cooperates with Antarsya and was part of the Antarsya-MARS 2015 electoral ticket.

Then also we have the anarchists. It is important to note that in Greece, we have groups that are anarchists in ideology, but also some anarchist or autonomous groups that have a more Marxist theory and analysis. However, at the same time they define themselves as being part of the specific anarchist/autonomous political milieu.

**And the anarchists or extra-parliamentary left of that type, they cooperate or coordinate with Antarsya?**

There are forms of cooperation more at the local level, in local initiatives, in popular assemblies in various areas, in antifascist mobilization. Also, in certain cases even in the trade-union movement, in rank-and-file forms of union militancy.

However, at the same time, they also have their own sectarianism "that is, they tend to think of their own unions or initiatives. Naturally, we are also talking about the more politically oriented anarchist practices. Apart from that, there is that version of anarchism more involved with street fighting and the rituals of clashing with the police.

**Okay, so let's talk specifically about Antarsya, the way it came to be formed and the different component elements within it. For each component element, tell us something about its history, its relative size, and its specific ideological culture.**

Antarsya was formed in early 2009, right after the December 2008 explosion of the Greek youth. It was a period of very intense participation of militants from the anticapitalist left in demonstrations, in street classes, in occupations, an enormous experience. It was a period when you could sense the first elements of the economic and social crisis to come.

The main component parts of Antarsya are New Left Current (NAR), which in relative terms it is the strongest current of Antarsya, although not the majority of course. There was originally a split in the Communist Youth and the Communist Party in 1989, but it also evolved its own particular identity as a form of a left-wing version of communist politics. It has a strong influence both in the student movement and the trade unions.

### **What do you mean when you say “left-wing communist politics”? I assume you don’t mean what Anglophones understand as “left communism”?**

It defines its position as the search for a new communist trajectory. It is not historically associated with some current, you cannot easily put it in a box in terms of its politics.

### **NAR has two wings, no?**

Well, it has different positions inside. These have to do mainly with questions regarding alliances, possible cooperations. It has traditionally been reluctant to form broader alliances, something that was evident in the failure of the 2007 discussions on a possible common front of the anticapitalist left, and this was also the case in the discussions regarding the possible cooperation of Antarsya with other groups.

However, many comrades inside NAR tend to be more open to alliances and a mass line. The main characteristic sometimes of NAR is a certain fear that if we engage in more contradictory front politics this might jeopardize the ideological and political advances that we have made in a certain sense. This does not mean that it is a group that’s sectarian by any definition; in contrast, it has a very long history of cooperating with other tendencies. However, in certain moments they can have a certain kind of defensive position regarding alliances.

### **Hang on. Ideologically, I have always assumed that NAR is a kind of version of third-period Stalinism, is that wrong?**

No, it would have been unfair to characterize them in this way.

### **But they’re in favor of red unions, for example?**

No, they’re not in favor of red unions, in the sense of red unions historically defined as such. They had this conception, originally articulated in the 1990s and early 2000s, that in order to oppose the bureaucratic and pro-capitalist mutation of trade-union bureaucracy, which is something that as an observation was close to reality, you need to develop some sort of organizational breaks within the trade-union movement in order to create more class-oriented unions.

I disagree with the tactical aspects position, it’s not the question of organization, it’s a question of politics and whether a more militant radical position can be hegemonic within an union and if you break from big unions you might just start having small minoritarian unions, which is useless. At the same time, in Greece you have the catastrophic example of the Communist Party and its sectarian conception of building PAME as a parallel federation, which has not helped things or made unions more militant. So this was also the point of disagreement in various instances with

NAR.

### **And what is NAR's relationship to the Soviet and Chinese experiences?**

Oh, they are very critical. From the beginning they were very critical. It was part of their self-critical break with the Communist Party. They consider them to have evolved into an oppressive and exploitative state; it is close to a state capitalism position, but not one of the historical variants associated with it. They have been sincere in this kind of breaking with the ideological traditions the Communist Party.

### **And is there any theoretical originality to NAR, or is it essentially an organization without any theoretical backbone?**

Although NAR never was associated with a specific theoretical current, I have to say that in terms of opening up political questions, they have played an important role in ideological debates, in the sense that they tried to open up the discussion especially in the late 1990s, but also later.

Whether one agrees or not with the answers they gave it was interesting "the debate on the unions, how are we going to face the issue with the unions in the new period of neoliberalism and full capitulation to capitalist modernization on the part of trade-union bureaucracies, is one example. Or, how are we going to rethink the relationship between party and front" they have played a role in this debate. Or their insistence on a new communist perspective.

There is also a younger generation of militants inside NAR that are really interested in opening up the theoretical debate.

### **If you're in a young militant in Greece who's becoming a Marxist, and you have this incredible choice, this smorgasbord of organizations to choose from, what would be the unique selling point of joining NAR over any of the other groups? Organizational culture, or . . .**

I think that it's a difficult question, I come from a different tradition. I'd say they present themselves as a political current that guarantees the existence of many political initiatives. However, they also try to insist on being more radical than other groups, more left. Especially in their youth this is part of their political culture "that they are the most radical of the radical left.

### **Okay, back to the components of Antarsya.**

Well, the second component of Antarsya is SEK.

### **Would you say SEK is a clone of the British SWP or there is something specifically Greek about SEK?**

No, I think there are some things specific to SEK. First, that it is part of Antarsya. Because regardless of the categorization made at the IST level regarding fronts, Antarsya is not a "front of a special type." That is, it's not very easy to say that SEK (and they've never said this) thinks that they are the revolutionaries and the others are reformists in an alliance.

Antarsya is a front of revolutionary forces, of anticapitalist forces, and they are part of this front, which is also a rather

democratic front. And there have been decisions which they accepted even if they did not like them and had opposed them. As far as I know, this is rather different than the practice of the IST tendency in other countries.

For example, Antarsya participated in the elections on a broader ticket than before, in cooperation with other groups, something that SEK strongly opposed. There was a national process of vote in Antarsya local and sectoral committees to take this decision and we made this decision, and they had their disagreements but they accepted this. I think this is something important. I'm not in a position to judge the extent to which it has affected the organizational culture or politics of SEK. However, I think this is an important element of the whole experience of Antarsya.

Also they tend to adopt positions as a result of the dialogue within Antarsya. For example, SEK has a very strong anti-European Union position and anti-euro position, something you do not see much in other European countries. Therefore, it's an interesting experience that SEK has been part of Antarsya, despite the many differences.

Of course, there are some open questions now, but this is part of a broader debate of how to deal with the current conjuncture. For example, SEK insists that we should not fight to broaden our cooperation with other anti-European Union forces insisting on being an anticapitalist front, which can be translated as a front of forces historically associated with the anticapitalist and revolutionary left. We insist on the need for broader alliance with left anti-EU forces.

At the same time, I think that the kind of opposition SEK would like us to have against the Syriza-led government is more reminiscent of the positions adopted in the 1970s by certain segments of the revolutionary left: "It is positive that the workers have voted for the Left, this is good, but this government will not be able to succeed because they are reformists and then somehow the workers will emerge in the political conjuncture and change things."

I think it's a position that's rather schematic in terms of the dialectics and runs the danger of being at the same time too friendly to the Syriza government and too sectarian in the sense of not helping the concrete articulation of an alternative to Syriza apart from general references to workers' power. However, perhaps I am bending the stick too much too the other side.

### **And SEK still have very bad relations with DEA, yes?**

Yes. I think it is rather negative. I am not saying that DEA do not have their own contradictions. Being part of Syriza made them make too many concessions and compromises. At the same time, they are a radical anticapitalist organization, they are in opposition to the central line of Syriza, they are more vocal in their opposition than other components of the Left Platform. They play a role in the antifascist, antiracist movement, so I think that we should cooperate much more with tendencies like DEA. Historical splits are irrelevant today.

Regarding the third component of Antarsya, we have Left Recomposition (ARAN). We came out of a process of fusion of two political groups in the early 2000s. Historically, we had a strong Althusserian influence. However, we have been trying to elaborate a more original political, using the reading we try to do of Gramsci, and we try to think how we can have, in this particular conjuncture, highly original revolutionary sequences based upon the combination of a fight for hegemony and power, including governmental power and also popular power from below.

Within Antarsya, we have supported the need for Antarsya to have a mass line. We have insisted, especially after the beginning of the crisis, on the need for Antarsya to realign itself with other anti-euro forces in the Left, even if these forces are not necessarily revolutionary or anticapitalist in the historical sense of the term. We think that the question of the euro, the European Union, and the debt are points that divide the Left and that at the same time offer the

possibility for new convergences.

In this particular conjuncture, after the 2015 election, we have insisted on the need for Antarsya and the anticapitalist left in general to make a self-critical analysis of what happened in the past five years.

In 2009, it was important to realign the anticapitalist forces – it was an end in itself. However, after five years of an immense political crisis, of really important breaks in relations of political representation that led to massive changes in the political landscape, of an almost hegemonic crisis, of a unique sequence of struggles, and of an electoral explosion of Syriza, then the fact that Antarsya, despite the commitment we've shown to the movement, despite the self-sacrifice with which Antarsya militants participated in the struggles, despite the fact that in programmatic terms Antarsya, was the first tendency of the Left to insist on debt annulment, break with the European Union, nationalization, as the way to actually get out of the crisis, the fact that we did not manage to create a more organic relationship to broader segments of the subaltern classes – this is a problem by itself.

We did not manage to change the balance of the forces in the Left. We must critically face this reality and come to an assessment of all the specific moments when Antarsya did not take advantage of opportunities that emerged. For example, why did we not take advantage the opportunity of the Movement of the Squares to initiate an original constituent process of the Left as a combination of anticapitalist militancy with the new forces coming from the movement?

Or, why we did not insist for the need of realignment of forces on the Left before the rise of Syriza, insisting for example that an anti-euro coalition might not necessarily be revolutionary but might be a way to reshape the Left? Consequently, we need this kind of self-critical approach in order to see how in the period – which is still open, it's a very dynamic situation in Greece – we do not miss other opportunities. Now this is the third current in Antarsya.

**So to schematize a bit, NAR would be to the left of ARAN and of Atarsya, and ARAN would be to the right? Obviously, left and right are not being used in a derogatory sense.**

Well, I would object to characterizing ARAN as right-wing. It is a little bit more complicated, because now nominally the Left, in the sense of opposing broader alliances, is represented by SEK and also OKDE-Spartakos, the Greek section of the Fourth International, which is the most critical group of all the current line of Antarsya.

*(It's also the smallest component, no?)*

No, not the smallest. What I am saying is that they think that Antarsya is in danger of losing the necessary anticapitalist and internationalist character.

Now the fourth component of Antarsya is Left Anti-Capitalist Regroupment (ARAS). We come from the same political roots; we were part of the same political group in the 1990s, but there was a split in 1997. It also has a certain Althusserian orientation.

In this phase, we have rather similar positions (this has not been the case in the past), and we cooperate within Antarsya. There are also smaller groups in Antarsya. There is EKKE (Revolutionary Communist Movement of Greece), which is a small group now, but it used to be the second largest Maoist organization in the 1970s.

There is also ARIS, which can be translated as Left Regroupment, which split from ARAS. Moreover, something important in Antarsya is the fact that there are people not associated with any particular group. It is also interesting

that in the past year we have seen the emergence of initiatives or tendencies or common statements or platforms within Antarsya that represented people who belonged to no organization. This I think is an interesting development.

**And how does Antarsya function – it has a unified leadership, a coordinating committee? And it's more than an electoral alliance, it functions between elections?**

Yes, it is based on local committees and a few sectoral committees, but most of them are organized on a local level. They have meetings, assemblies, they vote if they have a disagreement. We have national conferences from which we elect two bodies: the national coordination organ (this is not the best translation), which has 101 members, which convenes every two or three months depending, and there is also the central coordinating committee that meets every week.

**And is that proportional representation?**

No, we had something close to that. It's complicated to explain. But for the next conference, we've decided we will use a more proportional system based on the different platforms – but proportional, not winner-take-all.

Because we had the system when every elected representative to the conference – and our conferences were eight hundred to one thousand strong, representing around three thousand members – had the possibility to vote for a minority of its elected organ. This was somewhat proportional, but it could also be a manipulative kind of process because it meant bigger groups could control the vote. So we have moved towards the proportional.

This does not mean that today the representation is not relatively proportional. But it was done mainly through a handling of the current electoral system, and after a lot of discussion we decided to move towards the platform and proportional system. Although there are still strong disagreements because some think this will create a "federalization" of Antarsya and it would be better if you had ways for people to vote from different platforms.

In sum, this is an interesting debate. We elect members to the conferences, the conferences elect the national coordination body and also the central steering committee. And we also vote. In the first years it was more like trying to find a common ground, but I think it was an advance that we vote. For example, the election, the decision to have a broader alliance in the election, was taken under a vote. I think this is a democratic advance.

**And how do you deal with all the parasites that tend to aggregate around regroupments of the revolutionary left, that are simply interested in raiding or in not building the front as a whole, but on recruiting a few members and then splintering away – are they just excluded?**

I don't think that any group within Antarsya can be characterized this way. No, I don't think so.

**I think it would be a remarkable thing if Greece was the only country in the world that didn't attract these kinds of parasites!**

I don't think. The other groups of the anticapitalist left that are not part of Antarsya, like Workers Revolutionary Party or the Maoist groups, we'd like them to be part of Antarsya even if they use it as a recruiting ground. In my opinion, if you have a front that has an actual function, it has an everyday working, a democratic culture and practices – even if a group were to use it as a recruiting ground, in the end it would be influenced and this would be part of an interesting dialectic.

**Okay, let's have a brief parenthesis about Althusserianism because you talk about these two or three organizations within Antarsya having an Althusserian conception. And that is something that wouldn't make sense to anyone outside of Greece, firstly because there are lots of misguided judgments about Althusser's own politics and his relationship to the Communist Party, but also because people don't understand what a Poulantzian politics would be.**

**They can understand more or less what readings of Gramsci, Trotsky, Eurocommunists might be, but a specifically Althusserian form of politics as opposed to philosophy of science or conception of the role of philosophy, doesn't seem to be obvious. What is a specifically Althusserian form of political strategy?**

Well I don't know if you can say there is a specifically Althusserian politics. When I'm saying there are groups with Althusserian tendencies, I'm saying they have a specific theoretical debt to Althusser, a particular analysis about the state and the ideological apparatuses of the state, a conception of the emphasis of the conjuncture. It's an open discussion about whether there can be an Althusserian politics.

I would suggest that these groups or militants that are trying to be Marxist or communist, that refer to the possibility of a revolutionary renewal of the communist strategy.

Now, it's interesting also to note that when we talk about Greece, we talk about a country where there has been an influence of Althusser and Poulantzas all over the Left. At least a certain version of Althusser was influential in the Communist Party of the Interior, especially its intellectuals. It was very influential in the split we discussed in the youth of the Communist Party of the Interior.

You can see the influence of Althusser in important theoretical and political journals, such as *Politis* in the 1970s and 1980s, or later *Theseis*, the theoretical review directed by John Milios. This means that it is easy to see this kind of influence in the youth of a certain vocabulary in many currents of the Left.

So you might say that as a joking exaggeration, that Althusser in the Greek left is a bit like Hegel in 1840s Germany. You have Althusserians of the Left and Althusserians of the Right. For example, Aristide Baltas, the current minister of education and culture, historically associated with *Politis* and the university movement, is an internationally acclaimed Althusser scholar.

**Okay, let's talk about the uncomfortable questions. The perspective from outside Greece is that Antarsya's electoral results are almost invisible and that there seems to be no real trend for them to improve in any substantive form. And what troubles many people in the anticapitalist left outside of Greece is not so much the existence of Antarsya or the necessity to regroup the revolutionary left and have an independent existence outside Syriza, but, number one, the refusal to respond positively to the call for a government of the anti-austerity left, and more specifically, the absolute insistence on the necessity at all possible times to have an independent electoral presence. Despite the enormous amount of energy that is expended on that for very small results. How would you respond to that?**

As I said earlier, it is obvious we need to go through a process of self-critique. If you just look at electoral results, you cannot understand the actual influence of Antarsya, its role in social movements, its role in debates on the Left, its actual political influence. It is obvious that Antarsya and its positions have a much broader appeal, but at the same time, under the electoral pressure, we could not perform better.

**But isn't that a problem? Everybody can recognize that Antarsya is not simply a small irrelevant group, but the contrast between the electoral results — which are disastrous, they are microscopic — and the**

### **broader influence.**

This problem also signifies the contradiction in the strategy of Antarsya. As I said, until 2009 or 2010, at the beginning of the crisis you could see the emphasis on the regroupment and realignment of the forces of the anticapitalist left as an end in itself. It was necessary to bring the left anticapitalist forces into a more unitary experience and experiment with a more mass line, without investing particularly in electoral terms.

However, the problem is after the crisis it was obvious that the radical left should aim at broadening its appeal and playing a much more important role. I think it was exactly there that our main problems came to the surface.

I insist on the first person plural of that “ I would not like it to come across as just a criticism of other tendencies. We have all been carrying the traces, or the scars, of a whole period of crisis of the revolutionary left. Because what was the anticapitalist left until that period? What was the anti-capitalist left of the 1990s or the 2000s?

If you can see it, it was a left of resistance, of movement militancy, and of a general ideological and ethical defense of the revolutionary perspective. It did not have a coherent strategy, it was not a Left that could aim for power or hegemony, and it lacked a revolutionary strategy. Despite some urgent calls at the international level “ I always remember the call by the late Daniel BensaÃd to open the debate on strategy “ in fact this debate was never opened.

You can even say in a certain way this was also the problem of Syriza, it also represented a Left, although not anticapitalist, of resistances, movements, and general ideological defense of a socialist perspective. And within the confrontation of Syriza with political power, all the problems of the old conceptions coming from the right-wing tradition of Eurocommunism and its perspective of progressive governance re-emerge and cannot face the reality of the state, apart from the question of the European Union.

I would say our left, the anticapitalist left, was still in a strategic crisis in this period and this led to losing important political moments, crucial moments, when this kind of inability to have an answer to the challenges of the day was made evident in the case of Antarsya. For example, we were the first tendency of the Left to realize you could have a concise program of transitional demands that could actually answer the crisis, be radical and anticapitalist, and at the same time have the sense of immediacy and be very easy to communicate to people.

That was the combination of the immediate stoppage of payments and annulment of the debt, the exit from the eurozone, the rupture with the European Union, mass nationalizations as part of a program of productive reconstruction. These were things you could say to people and they could realize that they were good starting points.

Along the way, it became obvious that there was an important process both of realignment of forces within the Left and of new divisions, especially on the question of the euro. At the same time, we lacked any kind of necessary audacity to make an open appeal to say, we could have built a broader coalition based on the negation of the debt, the exit from the euro, the nationalization, and some general references to socialist policy.

It was possible in that period. If that process had evolved “ I’m not saying it was only our responsibility, one might pose the same question regarding the choices of the left currents inside Syriza “ we would have had a very different landscape on the Left at the beginning of the movement, perhaps a very different balance of forces.

Secondly, we had the Movement of the Squares. We were part of it, every day we were there in the squares. But we did not think what to do with it. This was neither a simple “sociological phenomenon,” nor just this impressive

convergence of people who were militants with people who had never taken part in a movement. It was at the same time a crucial moment of repoliticization of society through this reclaiming of public space that people were looking for a new politics.

However, we never thought: how are we going to transform this into a constituent process for a new left? We did not think of it. We thought of it afterwards. For example, I listen to many people impressed by the emergence of Podemos, and I think about this in a self-critical way, because we had something bigger – the Greek Movement of the Squares in 2011 was bigger than the indignados movement, and it embraced the whole left.

Then, of course, we never realized that the question was about power. We did not realize it. We entered the electoral cycle of 2012 trying to be the best opposition at that time against the systemic parties. In fact, it was obvious that the political crisis was so deep, and people had realized after two years of intensive fighting, during which we had used all traditional and non-traditional means to pressure the government, that only a political rupture could put an end to austerity.

Someone should have offered them a political exit strategy, in the name of reclaiming governmental power. At that point, we did not have this position, but Syriza had it. I do not know if Syriza had it through some sort of insight, or from some opportunistic electoral maximalism in order to survive the pressure from other tendencies. However, it fit, it was the missing signifier in the political crisis.

Yes, the question was a question of power, and this initiated a new political sequence. The anticapitalist left did not stand up to that challenge because it had no actual revolutionary strategy. Because we have never had a serious conversation about how it is possible, in an advanced capitalist formation, to combine the question of governmental power with forms of popular power from below as part of a highly original version of a dual power strategy. We did not think of these questions.

Even after 2012, after the electoral shock, in both the positive and negative aspects of it, we continued avoiding the elaboration of a strategy. If you enter an electoral cycle that will end with the possibility of a Syriza government, how do you become a useful vote? Not a vote of ideological commitment, but a vote that is useful in the parliamentary system?

If you could have your own original position regarding a left-wing government and the kind of program and politics it would need, then you could be able to say: “Okay, you vote for us, because if we are the crucial vote in parliament, we can push in that direction, or we will be the useful opposition in parliament.”

However, we did not evolve our reading of the conjuncture. Even regarding the question of whether Antarsya could realign itself with other forces that were close to Antarsya – anti-euro socialists or communists, other forces – it took us too long to decide. This was a very big waste of political time and political capital in all this, until we managed to have a more unitary expression.

So it’s not that people turned their backs because they thought we were paranoid leftists or class renegades. It was because they said, “Yes, you are saying things that are more correct or more to the point, but this is a question of election, we need to find a useful vote.”

I think we must take all this into consideration and attempt to actually think and change, because I think it’s not whether you make mistakes but whether you stop making the same mistakes – this is what makes the difference in life, not only in politics. You need to use the cathartic character, the catalytic character, of this whole process. Because we are in a very crucial position in Greece, in the sense that it is not the end of the game.

It is not 1981. In 1981, Pasok was hegemonic. It put in practice a certain version of the program of the reformist left which was a program of welfare state plus capitalist modernization. No one could offer an alternative. That's why Pasok could incorporate and corrupt the left. It is not like that today. The new government is under immense pressure on the part of the European Union, and we have a continuous cynical coup d'état against the sovereign will of the Greek people. It is a contradictory situation.

However, even now, in this period of negotiations, whether it is June or even if it takes longer, there is place for an alternative. An alternative that actually answers these contradictions, not an expression of theoretical and political laziness, like a very simple leftist critic in the tone, "Oh, they are renegades, they will fail," because this could be just an excuse for doing nothing.

I am talking about an actual effort to present an alternative in the sense of what would it mean now in Greece for things to go a different way, to not miss this historical opportunity, and not be defeated by the European Union and international capital.

We need to have concrete suggestions regarding what a really left-wing government should do with the debt, with the euro, with nationalization, etc. We need a roadmap to exit the euro, on how to disobey, in very specific and practical terms, the European Union, on nationalizations, etc. We need concrete proposals for a new constituent process and how to combine profound institutional transformation with new forms of intervention of the popular movement.

This is the kind of politics that are necessary today. We do not need the politics of theoretical and political laziness and of simple criticism of government shortcomings. We need of course to criticize Syriza, insist on this criticism, but we must also elaborate an alternative.

This is what is at stake if we want also to be part of the exit from the problem. Because, if this historical cycle ends up with a full restoration of capitalist dominance in the political scene, then in the end we will all be part of the defeat. Then people will hold us equally responsible for missing the opportunity of turning Greece into the weakest link of the European chain.

Of course, there is a broader historical dimension to this question. So this is what I think is the challenge for Antarsya, for the anti-EU forces in general, and in a certain different way for the left, anticapitalist forces within Syriza. We need to find ways to elaborate the alternative, this is for me the challenge.

### **Why did you not cooperate with Syriza? Couldn't this be considered a "united front tactic"?**

The reason lies exactly on the question of strategy. The main dividing line today in Greek society does not concern simply the question of austerity. It has more to do with whether there is going to be a rupture with the main narrative of the Greek bourgeoisie for the past five decades, namely the attachment to the "European Integration" process.

Today, an exit from the vicious circle of austerity, recession, and debt would above all be a break with the embedded neoliberalism and the inherently neoliberal character of the EU and the eurozone. And it is here that we can see the shortcomings of the Europeanism of the leading group of Syriza.

We insist that a progressive and democratic exit from the Greek crisis requires a program of ruptures, and we insist on the need for the strategy of ruptures to be elaborated and represented politically by an autonomous political pole of the radical and anti-EU left.

This does not imply some traditional sectarianism. We know very well that many militants inside the left currents within Syriza have similar positions. We insist on a dialogue and coordination with them, and, naturally, we are very much interested in the debates not only within Syriza but also in the broad social alliance that Syriza represents electorally. We have always opted for cooperation inside the movement. However, this requires the necessary political autonomy of this radical alternative in order to influence the debates, and in general the political and ideological balance of forces in the entire Greek left.

Does this mean that we abandon the united front? No, but a united front cannot be built without a programmatic base and a unifying narrative that refers to the basic dividing lines in each specific historical conjuncture, and in the Greek case this includes the question of Greece's relation to the European Union, the question of an alternative to the "European Road."

I do not think that today we need simply a front of the revolutionary forces, especially in a conjuncture such as Greece's, and perhaps in this I disagree with some of the comrades inside Antarsya. I think we need a radical left front based upon the necessary strategy of ruptures, a front that would be necessarily contradictory and in which the anticapitalist forces could struggle for hegemony.

Such a front, which would attempt to be the leading force of a broad social alliance, a potential "historic bloc," is indispensable if we actually want to take advantage of the window of historic opportunity that has opened in Greece. However, Syriza is far from being this front, and this requires an alternative project for the Left in contrast to both "realism" and sectarianism.

### **What do you think of the conjuncture and the Syriza-ANEL government? What do you think Antarsya's position should be?**

Well, the first months of the new Syriza-ANEL government have made evident the extent of the pressure for austerity and neoliberal reforms that Greece's creditors can exercise. The EU and the IMF are currently denying the Greek government the ability to implement even its very modest and not very radical program. They are currently using Greece's financing from EU funding and liquidity injections from the ECB as means of blackmailing the new government into continuing the same policies of social devastation.

The calculation behind this pressure is not technical but political: to send the message that no one can escape the extreme disciplinary neoliberalism that is today what the leading forces in the EU consider normal. The problem with the new Greek government is its insistence that it is possible to negotiate with the EU and the IMF a way out of austerity while at the same time remaining in the eurozone and fully honoring its debt commitments.

This has led to an almost agonizing effort to find the sums necessary to repay its loans and a series of negotiations with the representatives of the "institutions" (namely the infamous troika) that have only led to continuous pressures for concessions and compromises and a postponement of important preelection promises by Syriza. In this sense, any new agreement with the EU and the IMF and any new loan agreement will be necessarily accompanied by commitments to more austerity and neoliberal reforms.

We should not think of it as simply a big showdown with our creditors in June at which the new government will face a choice between capitulation and a heroic exit. There is also the chance of an endless cycle of negotiations that leads to an impasse and a danger of default, followed by another last-minute, temporary solution (after more concessions on the part of the Greek government) until the next impasse, and so on.

Regarding the new government, what we need is a constructive left-wing opposition, a critique of its strategy and

tactics in the name of the possibilities offered by a historical window of opportunity opened, in the last instance, by a wave of struggles without precedent. This requires a systematic attempt to propose concrete alternatives that can make possible a different course of things, from the big questions of the relation to the EU to the challenges of everyday life.

Such a kind of constructive opposition is very different from the tactic adopted on the part of the Communist Party, which more or less not only presents Syriza as the bourgeois alternative but also bases this upon a very defeatist reading of the past five years that underestimates the importance of the struggles and of the mass changes in relations of political representation. In what is an extreme case of political "subjectivism," for the Communist Party the only criterion to judge a specific conjuncture is its own influence!

I understand that also in certain segments of the anticapitalist left there is a danger to simply denounce Syriza and simply treat the new government as a potentially social-liberal government. I think this would be wrong because it would underestimate the extent to which the new situation can be traversed and influenced by the aspirations and demands of the popular classes.

In the end, it would treat the defeat and capitulation of the new government as a self-fulfilling prophecy. One might think that there is also a certain theoretical and political laziness to thinking about the conjuncture and without elaborating concrete alternatives to Europeanism beyond simple anticapitalist verbalism, a laziness that seeks the comfort of simply denouncing and waiting for the inevitable defeat.

Therefore, in contrast to both the simple support of the government and the simple denouncing of it, what is needed is an attempt to think of a strategy of ruptures as a strategy for a new "historic bloc." The emergence of a broad alliance in struggle of the forces of labor, of culture and of knowledge, the new politicization of Greek society, the various forms of experimentations with new social practices "all these attest to the possibility of a new historic bloc assuming a leading role in Greek society and articulating a new narrative beyond actually existing neoliberalism and towards a new socialist perspective.

It is obvious the strategy of negotiation adopted by the leading group in Syriza and the whole programmatic orientation of a loosening of austerity (and the creation of social safety net as basis for a new cycle of investment and growth) within the framework of the eurozone, falls short of this challenge. However, the same goes as well for simple anticapitalist rhetoric.

What is needed is work on the program, on the necessary roadmap for a break with the euro and the EU, on how to articulate a left government with a strong movement and forms of popular power from below, in a contemporary form of a dual power strategy, on how to think of profound democratic institutional transformations, on how to learn from current experiments in self-management and social solidarity.

### **Why this insistence on the break with the euro and the EU?**

The extent and depth of the Greek crisis cannot be understood without taking into account the evolution of "European Integration." The Greek crisis and the social devastation because of the austerity packages is a manifestation of the deeply undemocratic character and the embedded neoliberalism of the European integration process and in particular of the eurozone.

Since 2010, Greece has been the terrain of a giant experiment into the possibility of the European institutions imposing a violent change in the social paradigm. This is not the exception; it is becoming the new normal in the EU. The euro and the European treaties are neither technical nor simply monetary issues. They lead to a condition of

limited sovereignty that facilitates the most aggressive capitalist strategies.

In this sense, the fight against the euro and the EU is also a struggle to recuperate popular sovereignty. This anti-democratic and disciplinary aspect of European integration is manifest in the treaties and mechanisms regarding the eurozone, with all their penalizing mechanisms for excessive deficits and also in the logic of this violent socioeconomic nation-building imposed upon Greece (which has been treated as a sort of a failed state).

In this sense, we can say that today the question of sovereignty becomes a class stake. We need a democratic popular sovereignty, in the sense of a democratic control against the systemic violence of internationalized capital.

Of course we all know the problems associated with the notion of sovereignty, in particular in its association with nationalism, racism, colonialism. However, I am talking about a sovereignty based on a social alliance different than that of bourgeois sovereigntyism, an alliance of popular forces, based upon the common condition, the solidarity and common struggle of the subaltern classes, a reinvention of the “people” (or even the “nation”) as a collective subject of struggle and emancipation.

### **What is Antarsya’s relation to the social movements?**

Antarsya has been active in most social movements. Apart from our grounding in the student movement, we have a strong presence in the trade-union movement, in the antifascist movement, and also in local movements and initiatives (that can also account for the good electoral results of Antarsya in regional and municipal elections). There is a very strong culture of activism in social movements in Antarsya, and one might say one of the reasons it is respected as a tendency of the Left also has to do with the dynamism and quality of this activism.

This also has to do with the non-sectarian attitude mainly adopted by union and movement activists from Antarsya. Their respect for the necessary autonomy and democracy within the movement and their insistence on unity in struggle is in contrast to the sectarianism of the Communist Party, with its insistence on separate “class unions,” separate mass rallies, separate days of action, which has only led to unnecessary divisions and an inability to coordinate forces at crucial moments.

This means that our principle aim, one way or the other, is first of all to have a movement, to have mass participation and mass mobilization, to have an escalation of struggle, and on this base to alter the political balance of forces “and not the other way around. Of course, this insistence on the need for victorious movements means that we want to actually engage with the responsibilities this implies and not simply “support” them, as outside supporters or agitators, or to treat them as recruiting grounds

### **What lessons can we draw from the Greek experience regarding the crisis of the anticapitalist left and its possible recomposition?**

I think there important lessons to be learned from the Greek experience. It showed that it is possible to have specific conjunctures where social and economic crisis combined with important sequences of struggle and protest can lead to conditions of a crisis of hegemony that offer important challenges but also opportunities for the Left to intervene.

At the same time, it has also made evident the fact that unless the anticapitalist left stands up to the challenge, it might find itself in a situation where other forces of the reformist left can take the initiative. In such conjunctures militancy in the movement is not enough. The crucial aspect is political strategy and program, the ability to realize the potential of each historical turning point.

One might say that the Greek crisis also acted as a litmus test for the shortcomings of a particular version of anticapitalist politics that was based upon a combination of anti-neoliberal resistance and a general ideological defense of socialism. What is needed is an anticapitalist left that would stand up to the challenge of power and hegemony and attempt to think in terms of potential historical blocs.

The very fact that in the background of a conjuncture of a profound crisis of neoliberalism and new worldwide reemergence of mass movement politics, most currents of the anticapitalist left, at least in Europe, have found themselves (ourselves is perhaps better here . . .) in a situation of strategic and ideological crisis, have faced various forms of internal strife, and have seen the limits of their organizational crisis – this makes extremely necessary and urgent a process of collective self-critique and an attempt to actually try and think of different ways to do politics.

An important aspect of this process of self-critique must be that in the current conjuncture we cannot think in terms of historical currents and that we cannot insist on traditional versions of building the organization as an embryonic form of the party.

Rather, what is needed is a new constituent process for the anticapitalist left based upon a sober analysis of the conjuncture, a self-critique regarding the limits of our previous politicization, a political and theoretical confrontation with the open questions of strategy and in particular the dialectic between transitional program, left-wing government, and popular movements as part of a revolutionary strategy.

We desperately need to open the strategic debate, based upon actual confrontation with the urgent questions of the day; the refusal of a simple dogmatic return to the “authority” of the classics; the attempt to transform notions such as “workers’ control” from catchphrases to political processes and elaborations; the insistence on making concrete assessments of the experiences of the movements, including the contradictory experiences of left-wing governance in Latin America; and the thinking of the necessary dialectic between “war of position” and “war of movement” in the context of the neoliberal “passive revolution” and the crisis of the neoliberal paradigm.

A necessary aspect of this process should be the acceptance of the fact that all contemporary organizations of the anticapitalist left are just fragments created by a long history of crisis of the revolutionary movement and cannot be held to be the sole bearers of political truth.

That is why the form of the front takes up a strategic role in this necessary recomposition of the anticapitalist left. We need democratic fronts that can attract and incorporate all the different currents, groups, sensitivities, experiences of the anticapitalist left, and can help the emergence of new political syntheses aiming at coming to terms with the new conjuncture.

This conception of the democratic front as a laboratory for the collective elaboration of strategy and the translation of the experiences coming from the movements into mass political practices, is indeed something very important, and the history of Antarsya as a democratic front, despite its many shortcomings, can indeed contribute a lot to this debate.

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<https://www.jacobinmag.com/2015/04/antarsya-syriza-communist-party-greece-euro/>].