

The Country He Loved So Well: a Conversation with Yanis Varoufakis

Thursday 28 March 2019, by [QOSJA Griselda](#) (Date first published: 24 March 2019).

I was waiting for Yanis Varoufakis seated in an old Hamburg cafe while outside everything had turned gray. A light mist blanketed the roofs, trees, cars and the occasional passerby. It was the perfect day for snowfall although the weather forecast had given no hope for it. Inside the lights were on, the cafe packed and the conversations loud. The waiters maneuvered skillfully through the room, collecting half-eaten plates of food, under the strict surveillance of the headwaiter that although seemingly busy managed to look as bored as could be. Judith Meyer finally called. “We are at the front door”, she said. Judith, a polyglot fluent in thirteen languages, joined DiEM25 in 2016, in her own words “because her dream of Europe had been demolished.” We shook hands and she smiled warmly.

Yanis carried himself with the sort of ease that gave the impression he would feel as comfortable at a political convention or in a university auditorium, and yet be a stranger to them both. During the course of our conversation, I agreed with Yanis on some things and disagreed on others, but certainly I did share his view that the real heroes are those who will never be heard about. Cleaning personnel, train conductors, nurses and many others who like Atlas carry the weight of the mundane, in order for others to rise above it, busy themselves with theories and lead change.

There is nothing less egalitarian than this: a world divided, categorized and much too conventional. Yanis thinks that to have a worker on the advisory panel of DiEM25 would be tokenism. To me that would be participation and a clear symbol that the movement is not aiming for some sort of a platonic configuration with workers on one side and their guardians on the other. As interesting and symbolic as Pamela Anderson’s support might be, the blue-collar worker’s opinion should be just as interesting and as symbolic for us. The blue-collar worker is needed in the base as much as she is needed in the advisory panel. I regret not asking Yanis how many workers are on the DiEM25’s election list; if there aren’t many, there should be. I have no doubts that a man might advocate women’s issues as well as a woman, and I understand that you don’t need to be working-class in order to represent working-class interests, but the history of democracy can unfortunately be reduced to singular names, names that often have had only an abstract connection to the cause and class they represented. Until we have intersecting social positions, where the intellectual balances his service to society with manual labour and the manual worker is engaged in intellectual activities, such an arrangement is oppressive and isolated, since the worker at the base is needed only for her vote.

Yanis’s celebrity status in Germany, acquired during his time as Finance Minister of Greece, might serve to position the core/periphery discourse in a successful transnational configuration, for Yanis will lead the list of European Parliament candidates for DiEM25’s German affiliate “Demokratie in Europa.” This is unprecedented but timely: the Europe that takes pride in the free movement of workers, should welcome the movement of politicians. Yanis’ love for Greece will not prevent him from loving Germany, Europe or the world as a whole.

Today there is decay in Europe, much like in Kenne Gregoire's paintings, but as in them there is also beauty. Beauty found in the dream of solidarity and prosperity in Europe. Such a dream happens to be DiEM25's too; in the conversation that follows we discuss DiEM25's objectives and Europe's future.

Yesterday was Gramsci's birthday and I wanted to start our conversation by going back to Gramsci's concept of ideology. He had a reductionist interpretation of ideology and argued that ideologies have a class character, so that there is one ideology of the capitalist class and one ideology of the working class, and each antagonizes the other. In an interview for the Transnational Institute you said that anyone could join DiEM25, independently of political party affiliation or ideology, because democracy can be a unifying theme. Does DiEM25 aspire to surmount class conflict and differences?

No (laughs). But it is really very simple. Class conflict will only be transcended once capitalism is replaced by a socialist kind of organization of production. But, during a great depression, during a massive crisis of financialized capitalism, class conflict takes a completely different shape. Let me give you the extreme example of Greece. You have an employer who is bankrupt and about to close down, and workers are not paid but are looking at the employer with sympathy and at the same time hoping that he will not go bankrupt, because then they will lose their jobs and any chance of getting paid. Suddenly the class conflict between such employers and their employees becomes very different. During such times political monsters rise up and change the game completely, ideologies like fascism, Nazism, and racism take an upper hand that is separate from what Gramsci referred to as the ideology of the working class or the ideology of the bourgeoisie. What DiEM25 says is that after 2008, Europe is experiencing a unique crisis, not a standard capitalist crisis but one of these pivotal moments when you have collapse. When you have a system and a bourgeoisie that has lost control of capitalism, at those moments, there are two options for what we on the left can do. One is to let capitalism collapse, hoping that something good will come out of it. This is not our view: time has proved that this is catastrophic, what is most likely to happen is that the Nazis will rise up. The second is to create an alliance, a movement where Marxists, anti-systemic liberals, ecologists, feminists and so on, get together to stabilize politics, so as to then be able to rebuilt class conflict, and this is our view.

In *Adults in the room* you write about Yiorgos Chatzis and Dimitris Christiulas, whose suicides were triggered by the Greek depression. You also write about Lambros, an Athens-based translator. Although unnamed, you also write about all of those whose life has been profoundly touched by austerity. Is there place for people who lack any significant social status on DiEM25's Advisory Panel? I am afraid its current representation might give a false message of elitism.

Advisory panels are by definition elitist. They are advisors. The advisors do not make the movement. It is the members that make the movement; it is the grassroots people who are running our organisation. People like Judith, people like Lambros, people like me, people like you if you join us. None of us would be advisors; the advisors are there for two reasons, first, because when we start a new movement, we need to signal to the world what kind of aesthetic, ideology, what kind of thinking our new movement is representing. So they are not unknown people, because if they were, they couldn't play the role of a signal. Maybe you would think that we shouldn't have signaling, but we disagree, we think that by having Noam Chomsky there, by having George Bizos, Nelson Mandela's lawyer, we are signifying something, something that is important and gives important information about us to citizens across the world. What we need are collectives, national councils, we need people that will make it a movement. The advisory panel does not make the movement, it simply helps signal its complexion.

But isn't there a disconnection between this elite who leads the movement and those who really are the movement?

The advisory panel is not leading the movement.

Griselda: but aren't they advising it?

Yanis: Their advising is symbolic. They are advising as much as you are advising.

Griselda: So you are using their names?

Yanis: We are using their names, they are happy to be associated with DiEM25, to declare their support for DiEM25, and we are using them to tell you that, do you know what, that we have somebody like Saskia Sassen, James Sanders in the United States, maybe you should join the advisory panel. It is okay, it doesn't really matter. When you visit the website of a movement that has just started, you read the manifesto which is the most important thing, but you also want to see what kind of people are endorsed by the movement and endorse the movement. And I think that it is okay. It is perfectly okay. When the Second International started and Friedrich Engels was part of it, that signified something. Here you have a social thinker who also happens to be an industrialist and is supporting Marx. It says something.

Griselda: I am still of the opinion that someone of the working class would signify something too...

Yanis: That would be complete tokenism. If DiEM25 is not comprised of working-class people, of feminist women, of emigrants, then we have failed as a movement but we are not dying to say "here is a token working-class person with a picture and a portrait," there is nothing more diminishing than that.

Judith: Do you know that Bobby Gillespie is part of our advisory panel? He is working class.

Griselda: I guess Bobby is not working class, his father is working class.

Yanis: He is there because he is a singer, not because he is working class.

Judith: It is not tokenism, it's not like we would be exploiting people from a working class background...

Yanis: Once more, the advisory panel is there to signify ideas. To make a connection between people you may know and the ideas you know with us. Because we want to show that there is pluralism and a great variety of ideas that you know and you can judge us on the basis of the selection we have made. Some people are very critical of Julian Assange, who is part of the advisory panel. But we would want to make a statement that, yes, we have Julian Assange, and therefore this gives you information that can be against us or in favor of us, whatever, but it gives you information.

When Srečko Horvat was asked during an interview to describe you, he chose two Greek words, *molon labe* - "come and get them." The words which, according to Plutarch, Leonidas said to Xerxes when he demanded his weapons. The Spartans lost the battle but caused severe damage to the Persians. Speaking of damage, how likely is DiEM25 to cause any damage to the EU's institutions as we know them? I mean, these institutions were ready to starve a nation for bank balances.

I don't think the point is to create damage; the point is to create conditions for progress and for restoring hope. To give people the sense that they can be in control of their lives, that the *demos* will

not constantly be excluded from democracy. This is what we want to do.

Let me put it more simply: if DiEM25 will come into power, will the institutions change?

We will transform them, we will save them from themselves. The European Central Bank needs to be saved (laughs), because now it is doing inordinate damage to Europe and I don't think that it is good for the people working there either. I speak to the people who work at the European Central Bank. They are not happy with what the European Central Bank is doing. Let's liberate them too!

DiEM25 - please correct me if I am wrong - proposes parliamentary and constitutionalization as the only viable alternative toward democratization. A sovereign European Parliament, would mean that it would handle all major policies, economical and fiscal included. Had we had such a parliament throughout the 2008 recession, would it have imposed the same austerity measures? We cannot deny that there are demographic asymmetries in Europe and representatives of smaller nations would be a minority. What is the likelihood that MPs on a transnational mandate would not represent their national interests?

Right, good question. We do believe in parliamentary democracy. It is a terrible system but is the best that there is. Point number one. Point number two, we have a common currency throughout most of Europe, the euro. The way it is structured, if it is not changed drastically, it will collapse at great cost to the majority of Europeans. To prevent this we need a democratic federation. We need to ensure that the decisions that are now being taken behind closed doors are taken in the open by people that represent us at the European level. We need a federal government. Either that or we should do away with the European Union. There isn't a third way, in the long run. If we know that the person we are going to elect at the pan-European level as our finance minister will decide the tax rate across Europe, or at least a federal tax rate, this would be an electoral system that builds transnationality. To forge transnationality we could agree that to be elected you need to run as part of a transnational party that runs in at least ten countries. Your question about nationalism is important. As a Marxist, I don't believe there is such a thing as national interest. Karl Marx wrote beautifully against the illusion of a national interest. There is an interest of workers, of women, of patriarchal oligarchic men. Nationalism is a fiction by which power gets perpetuated. We do not need to overcome nationalist interest because such a thing does not exist. We need to create a progressive force, for all workers in Europe, for all women in Europe, for the environment, and all we need to have to move in that direction is a transnational movement.

In the introduction he wrote for Solzhenitsyn's *One day in the life of Ivan Denisovich*, Yevtushenko quotes Brecht's observation that a country which needs heroes is an unfortunate one. But even more unfortunate is the country that needs heroes and has none. It seems to me that the Greek heroic age did not end with the Trojan War, but has stretched out to modern times. I can think of Miko Theodorakis, Manolis Glezos, Panagoulis. Why is Greece such an unfortunate country, always thirsty for heroes?

It's a good question, isn't it? I think it has a lot to do with geography. Greece is blessed and cursed to be at the crossroads between Asia and Europe, between Russia and Middle East. A lot of history has happened there. We have been in the eye of the storm for many, many years. I am sure this is not a complete explanation... if you think that the Cold War did not begin in Berlin but in the streets of Athens in December 1944, well before the partition of Berlin, and the Eurozone crisis began in Greece as well, yes we seem to have a capacity to be the first domino to fall. But just to comment on heroes - the most important heroes are those you have never heard of. They are the people who make remarkable sacrifices against all odds, who will never be known, who will hold their ground, who will not compromise, and might lift somebody on their shoulders, somebody who becomes

known like the people you mentioned.

Kazantzakis is one of the writers I love most. In his *Report to Greco* he writes lovingly about Greece and its people. You do so too. In your advocacy for a pan-European movement, is there place for the love of one's nation?

There is plenty of room for the love of your friends, your children, your dog, your village, your town, your region, your country, people who speak the same language as you, Europe as a whole, the world. I don't see why one should be pitted against the other. Why should we make a choice? To love Europe I do not have to stop loving Greece. This is ridiculous.

You might have read Cavafy's "Waiting for the Barbarians"...

Yes, of course I have.

The motif is simple: Every empire needs enemies to justify its existence, and if the enemy - the other - does not exist it must be created. Was Greece the justification that the EU needed to justify its systematic failures?

I don't think so. I don't believe in a conspiracy theory against Greece. Greece was not on the radar of Ms. Merkel, Mr. Macron, Mr. Hollande or Ms. Lagard. They were clueless about the damage they had done to Europe by creating the Eurozone in the way they created it. Then a crisis happens, their banks went bankrupt and it turned out that it was important to them, in order to save their banks, to loan a huge amount of money to the Greek state. The rest is history...

You are saying they were unaware of what was happening in Europe?

They were clueless. They had no idea what they were doing. They didn't see the crisis coming, they hadn't anticipated it. Like the Americans didn't anticipate that Wall Street would collapse. Who anticipated that Lehman Brothers and GM would collapse? That all the banks would fail? They had no idea about that.

I am not economist, but I do understand that there are historical cycles in economy and finance, that there are always crises...

But the kind of crises where everybody dies at the same time, that all the companies go bust, what happened in 2008 - that no one within the establishment expected. There were some of us that were saying that it was going to happen but we were treated like the village idiots, we were considered eccentric fools. The people in authority never believed that it would happen. When it happened, they just tried to put out fires, one after the other, in a way that didn't deal with the root cause of the problem. When Greece collapsed first, they said okay, this is a problem because Deutsche Bank is already bankrupt and the Greek state owes Deutsche Bank money, so we have to give money to the Greeks so that they can give it to Deutsche Bank. They decide that and then, immediately afterwards, they realized that the Bundestag, the Christian Democrats and many of the Social Democrats, are not happy to give money to the Greek state because they were never told that this was money for Deutsche Bank. So they lied to them. They said the money is for the Greeks. As a result, it was easy for politicians and the media in Germany to point accusatory fingers toward the Greeks, making many Germans hate the Greeks. Consequently, many Greeks started hating the Germans and the whole thing span out of control because of a system, the eurozone, that was never designed to sustain shock waves of the type that came from Wall Street in 2008. Once politicians in Germany, in France, in Greece, lied to their parliament, they lied to each other, we ended up with a situation that Shakespeare depicts nicely in *Macbeth*: The perpetuation of one crime in order to

cover up an earlier crime. There was no conspiracy against Greece. They lied about Greece's bankruptcy by giving the Greek state huge sums of money while clobbering its people. Then they clobbered the Italians to send a message to the French. And so on... This is not a way to run Europe.

Are there hegemonic states in today's Europe?

The policies on the ground were written in Berlin, there is no doubt about that. That doesn't make the German state hegemonic within Europe. In the absence of a federal state in Europe, when you have a chain reaction of insolvencies and bankruptcies, the German chancellor, simply because she is the chancellor of the only serious creditor nation, writes the rules. But this is not a hegemonic position of the German state. The state is not just the chancellor. The Bundestag doesn't have a hegemonic position in Europe but is completely uninformed and doesn't know what is going on; it is being lied to all the time. It is no coincidence too that Bundesbank is constantly screaming about what is happening in Europe, for instance, what the ECB does.

Who runs Europe?

This is the paradox: We have a Europe run by the German Chancellor while the German state is not partaking in the running of Europe. Angela Merkel ran Europe for ten years. She decided every major decision, of course not on her own, with advisors and people behind the scenes. But there was never a European Council where she did not walk in to impose her views. And her views unfortunately were always those of never making a courageous decision today if it could be made tomorrow. Postponing her decisions until her political capital disappeared – and now nobody is running the show.

Basically you are saying that there aren't hegemonic states in Europe but there are politicians that...

And that leads to a very interesting situation when you haven't got hegemony but you have authoritarianism. They are not the same thing. Today we have authoritarianism without hegemony.

I personally think Diem25 is a great alternative, but I read the manifesto and found it slightly incoherent. On the one hand, it calls for a stronger parliament and a written constitution within two years, and on the other, it advocates decentralization and stronger local governments.

You see that is the great fallacy in Europe. Young people especially should not fall in that trap. They have been told that there is a trade-of: if we want more Europe there has to be less Germany; if we want more decisions to be made at the federal level then we have to reduce the sovereignty of the nation-state. What we have now is a situation where we do not have federal democracy or sovereignty at the EU level. And we do not have national sovereignty either. Look at the Greek state, sovereign only formally, the Italian state – just the same. In reality no decision can be made in Rome or in Athens, except on garbage collection. Fiscal policy, tax policy, monetary policy, interest rates, are all decided undemocratically at the center. Sovereignty in Rome is fictional. But imagine what would happen if we Europeanized the solutions to the big problems, like for instance large-scale green investments program – 500 billion euros to be invested across Europe on the green transition every year. Imagine we centralized the management of the public debt. Imagine if we had one banking system, not 19, and if we looked after this banking system and managed the banks centrally – instead of leaving it to the Italian prime minister the Greek prime minister or the German chancellor. Suddenly our governments would have more freedom, more sovereignty! This is why I reject your point that DiEM25's program is contradictory. Your view is based on the assumption that more sovereignty at the EU level must mean less sovereignty in our national capitals. Our view is

that, to give more sovereignty to our nation-states, we need more democratic sovereignty in Brussels!

A constitution would justify a federal sovereignty; do we have a constitutional moment in Europe?

Not yet. 2005 [1] was not a constitutional process; it was a top down thing. Constitutions must emerge from the grassroots, through citizens assemblies across Europe that culminate into one large paneuropean constitutional citizens' assembly. This is what we are proposing in our Manifesto. But, to get there, we need to change the mood across Europe first. People are worrying not about what will happen in the next ten years but about how to make ends meet by the end of this week. They are worried about negative interest rates eating up their pensions fund, they can't see Europe as source of solutions, they see it only as source of problems. If you say to them "let's sit down and write a constitution" they will say "go away." That is why we have long-term, medium-term and short-term objectives; in the short term we need to stabilize the situation. We need to deploy existing institutions without rewriting treaties, to restructure public and private debt, to fight poverty so that Europeans can start looking at Europe as a source of solutions, and then there would be a constitutional moment, we hope.

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P.S.

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Footnotes

[1] Note by Griselda Qosja: "2005" is a reference to the series of referendums held to ratify the Treaty establishing a Constitution for Europe signed in 2004 by the European Member states.