

Greek debate and Popular Unity: Awakening the European Left

Monday 28 September 2015, by [BUDGEN Sebastian](#), [LAPAVITSAS Costas](#) (Date first published: 9 September 2015).

An interview with Greek MP Costas Lapavitsas on Popular Unity and the case for a progressive Grexit.

Costas Lapavitsas has been vindicated — not that there's much comfort in that. From the beginning he argued that Greece leaving the eurozone was the only way Syriza could carry out its election program. The Syriza leadership instead stuck to their “good euro” policy, with disastrous results. The party recently split, with Lapavitsas and other members of Syriza's parliamentary group, along with a coalition from across the Greek left forming Popular Unity to contest in the elections later this month.

In the conversation below, building on his March interview with *Jacobin* [[1](#)], Lapavitsas looks back at the tumultuous events of the past year, evaluates Popular Unity's prospects going forward, and discusses what a Grexit from below would look like.

Jacobin

It's been an intense period since we last spoke, marked by several major events. The breakdown of negotiations, the call by Tsipras for a referendum, and then effectively the day after the referendum, a capitulation to the eurogroup. Was this sequence a surprise to you, how do you analyze what happened?

These were obviously very dense historical events, highly accelerated. I'm sure that people will keep talking about them in the future, and they will also look for more evidence, because there is an element of obscurity about them, we don't know exactly what happened.

What I could do right now is tell you how I experienced them and how they feel at the moment.

I supported Syriza in good faith, fielded elections under its banner, and fought for the success of its radical program. The call for a referendum by Tsipras looked like a clear decision by the leadership to push the radical line to the end.

I and many others were enthused by it, and the support by the poorest part of the population was breathtaking.

So you weren't surprised by the decision?

I was very surprised by the decision. It seemed like a very determined act that was going to take

Greek politics to the point of no return. I had hoped for such a development previously but the leadership never gave me much confidence that it was going to do it.

Then Tsipras called for a referendum and it seemed that we were indeed heading for a radical break. The response by the popular strata was remarkable, and the referendum result was astounding in the face of naked scaremongering. It appeared that important events were about to take place in Greece and more generally.

Important events did take place but, of course, not in the direction I had hoped for. The complete sellout that followed was breathtaking.

It indicated that the leadership of Syriza had called for the referendum without strategic determination, it was just a tactical move.

You think they called for the referendum thinking they were not going to win it, or that they would win it and it would be used as leverage for capitulation?

They certainly did not expect to win it with a thumping majority. That I can tell you. What the precise calculation was I don't know and it doesn't really matter. But I can tell you they did not expect to win it quite in that way.

It was a big shock, I'm sure, to them and to others as well. The vast sellout that followed proved that the referendum was just tactics and settled the discussion about the nature and the future of Syriza.

Even so, the referendum might well prove to be a strategic act in practice because the resounding victory of "No" has given to the radical left a legitimizing basis. It is because of the "No" in the referendum that we exist as a political force.

But, given that what was accepted by Syriza the day after was worse than what was being voted on anyway, how does it make any sense from Tsipras's perspective? Was it simply because the leadership got blindsided by the results and panicked? Or was it because they were really expecting to use the results of the referendum to negotiate some substantial improvements?

Tsipras made a huge mistake by calling for a referendum, that's clear. But I think that you need to move into the realm of psychology to understand the decision-making by the Syriza leadership at that point.

I don't really know why they did it. I think that rationality was abandoned by that group of people a long time ago. They live in their own world and believe in their own fictions. I can't tell what the calculation was behind the referendum and how they meant to use it.

It's also possible that they panicked when the result presented itself, realizing the enormous difficulties in dealing with it and turning the "No" into a "Yes". I don't know what calculations they made and to be honest it doesn't really matter.

You must have thought about it though?

I think that what is important is not the petty calculations about the referendum but what the actual turnout shows about the leadership. For a long time many of us had been in two minds whether the leadership, particularly Alexis Tsipras, had some mettle in it.

Which way would Tsipras jump when the real class issues were put on the table? Until the week

after the referendum, the answer was still in the balance. Tsipras had managed to keep everyone guessing, there was an element of doubt, which meant that people couldn't decide for sure what this guy would do when the critical political and social dilemmas emerged sharply.

The week after the referendum the question was answered. Tsipras didn't have the mettle. He didn't have what leaders of the Left are expected to have when confronted by ruthless class interest. He sided with the ruling class.

So apart from the meeting he had with the representatives of the opposition parties, one of his first acts was to replace Yanis Varoufakis as finance minister with Euclid Tsakalotos. How would you characterize both those as economists and political actors, contrasting them, leaving aside the celebrity magazine rubbish?

The act of replacing Varoufakis with Tsakalotos, in hindsight, was the first indication that the "No" of the referendum was not going to be a "No" in practice. It's true that Varoufakis had had some trouble in conducting the negotiations and being accepted by the lenders.

But his replacement was much more than that. Tsipras was basically telling us, "I'm not going to go the way of the No".

When I look more closely at Varoufakis and Tsakalotos, I have to say that both are disappointing, though for different reasons. Varoufakis has made hundreds of different declarations during this crisis and it's hard to know what he truly believes in.

I'm far from the only person who thinks that. It's hard to know what is the opinion of Yanis Varoufakis is on any particular subject. That's widely perceived in Greece. It is, of course, true that he has had an incredibly difficult job. But it is hard to see the guiding principle in the way in which he handled the job.

Tsakalotos is made of different stuff. He has distanced himself from Varoufakis and never played the media in the same way. However, deep down, Tsakalotos is even more disappointing than Varoufakis because he has made an enormous compromise.

Unlike Varoufakis, it was always clear what Tsakalotos believed in: a kind of redistributive and transnational reformism within the European Union, that's what he has always argued for. His tragedy is that the bailout deal he has personally signed allows for no such reformism, and he knows it.

The biggest surrender, the greatest loss of credibility, was actually made by Tsakalotos. He now finds himself in a pitiful moral position, which perfectly sums up the conservative transformation of Syriza and the abandonment of left-wing beliefs.

But, in theoretical terms, he's more consistently a Marxist than Varoufakis, or not?

Not really. Both of them have, of course, read and understand Marx as well as being highly-trained economists. But I wouldn't call Tsakalotos a consistent Marxist. Certainly he appreciates Marx, he understands the categories, there's no question of that.

But his preference was always for a kind of redistributive reform of the capitalist economy within the confines of the European Union and the European Monetary Union that allowed for none of Marx's inherent radicalism. And now he has abandoned even that vision.

It's true what you say about Varoufakis. It's amazing that he can speak so much, give so

many interviews, and publish so much on his blog and still be so difficult to read as a person. His voting record on the agreement itself is very erratic. He abstained first — he wasn't present for the first vote; he voted against the agreement for the second vote; and then he voted for it at the third vote. And what we've seen from outside Greece is that he's blowing hot and cold about both Tsipras and Popular Unity. Now he's launched this rather idiosyncratic idea of this "European network". Can you offer any insight on what his game plan, if there is one, might be or does he just want to be the center of media attention?

I don't think there is a game plan, to be honest. Yanis Varoufakis has had an incredible career, he's become a global celebrity on the back of Syriza success. That's finished, it's irretrievably gone. All the main actors of this period will be judged very harshly by history because it has been a dramatic failure.

Varoufakis is now, in my reading, trying to rescue his political career, trying to find a new political role for himself in the coming period. But his stock is not high among the Greek left, and internationally there is a lack of trust in what he says. This idea of this [European network](#), or party, will not go very far, I think.

Now, of course, one thing that did come out in the aftermath of this sequence was his "revelations" of his Plan B which he had been working on which involved a plan to hack illegally into the tax records of the Greek state using an external agency and then use this information to be able to produce a parallel payments system in the case of an exit from the euro. First of all, were you aware of this at the time, and also what you think of this "plan B" (or "plan X" as he calls it)?

Look, this is not serious. That's not what anyone would understand as a plan to change the currency of Greece. Perhaps an idea of this kind was floated, some discussions were had, something was drafted. I never saw any of that, but I'm prepared to say that a brief outline was drafted.

Yet, there was no plan and I can prove it. Yanis Varoufakis has himself uploaded on his blog a communication by Jamie Galbraith in which Jamie mentions a phone call to me that took place well after these events were over. Now, Jamie was very closely involved with Yanis at all stages, he was one of his close confidants, he travelled to Greece very frequently.

He states explicitly — as he also told me in that single phone call — that there never was a Plan B. Their group had never formulated a Plan B. In fact he called me to check whether I had developed a plan because they knew that I had been working on these ideas on my own and quite separately from anything that official Syriza was doing.

There never was a serious Plan B by the Syriza leadership and the reason is that they were never seriously interested in having one. To have a Plan B, you have to understand the class politics of the monetary union and the European Union, you have to be prepared for acute class struggle and you have to prepare the people for conflict.

Such a plan cannot be produced in an evening. It's impossible. Moreover, it requires a leadership that has some steel in its backbone, and I'm afraid that the Syriza leadership has none.

Would you say that one of the weaknesses of the Left Platform as well was that the struggle over a Plan B was kept as an internal party concern and it wasn't taken outside the party, and there wasn't much popular pedagogy about a Plan B, outside of the inner circles as it were? That allowed for a certain number of accusations to be thrown at people around the Left Platform that they were the "plot for the drachma", that they were obsessed with the

currency question at the expense of everything else (and the media added rumors about threats to arrest the governor of the national bank and take over the gold reserves and whatnot).

Do you think, retrospectively, that there was a certain kind of legitimism, that all these issues were kept within the party and not taken outside to an open national debate about these questions?

I would say two things about the Left Platform and how it handled this issue. First, it was extremely difficult to raise the question of the Plan B for a very long time. Cast your mind back to January, February, March, April, even much of May: Syriza had enormous domestic support and great international support.

It was practically impossible for a small opposition group within the party to come out openly with arguments and positions about a Plan B that contradicted the main thrust of the leadership.

Second, and possibly in hindsight, during the last couple months of the Syriza government the Left Platform could have been bolder, braver, more decisive, about pushing these alternative ideas into the public domain. It could have been more determined in coming out with documents, making points, forcing a critical debate about the actions of the leadership.

Not doing so was a mistake and we are paying the price right now because people are turning around and asking "Where were you then?" It's not an entirely fair criticism, of course, because the Left Platform had always registered its misgivings, but there it is.

In my case, moreover, it is even stronger than that. I've never been a member of the Left Platform formally but I've been extremely close to it. Throughout this period I've always registered publicly my criticisms of what the Syriza government was doing, usually at some personal cost.

But perhaps I, like the rest of us, could have been even more forthcoming. The documents were there, the problems of the official line were clearer and clearer . . . in the end, we didn't and we have to live with that.

So the current sequence consists of a left split away from Syriza to create the new organization of Popular Unity, elections being called for September, a certain amount of differentiation within the ranks of Syriza with figures such as Zoe Konstantopoulou announcing their support for Popular Unity, while other sections perhaps more formally close to the Left Platform allying themselves with the leadership of Syriza.

Finally, some talk at least of a national unity government between Syriza and the centrist parties if, as is likely, Syriza does not have an absolute majority.

The new configuration of Greek politics is very much a work in progress. It's impossible to sum it up at this stage, it's just begun. I can tell you that the split was forced by the Syriza leadership by calling an election when they had other options which they had aired for a bit but in the end decided the risks were too great and abandoned them. They went for an election in the hope that they would win it, isolate the left of Syriza and live happily ever after in the promised land of the new bailout.

The Left Platform worked out what was happening and acted very rapidly as soon as it became clear that the leadership would call an election. It was clear that the Left Platform could not possibly fight the election as a part of a Syriza that had signed up to the new bailout because that would have meant abandoning every principle, every programmatic statement, everything it had stood for. That forced the issue: a new political formation was created, Popular Unity.

Popular Unity is not a party and I don't think it is going to become one. It was conceived initially — and basically remains — an anti-bailout front that accepts all individuals and bodies which want to work for a consistent anti-bailout strategy.

What makes it different to Syriza is, first, its credibility since its MPs actually said “No” in Parliament and, second, its anti-bailout program which states clearly that implementing an alternative path for Greece is impossible without exiting the monetary union.

For Popular Unity the introduction of a new national currency is a means of implementing the radical program the country needs.

Naturally, Popular Unity has turned first to the left and addressed the small parties of the extra-parliamentary left that have shared part of its approach for a long time. This fact has pluses and minuses.

The plus is that there are very many excellent people in the extra-parliamentary left which could make strong contributions to both the political practice and the program of Popular Unity. The minus is the well-known baggage of the extra-parliamentary left: factionalism, looking inwards and, in the case of Greece, “know-all-ism”, which could actually be found throughout the Greek political spectrum.

So Popular Unity is a work in progress, since it is a very task to marry all these organizations and currents within the Left. It's a very dynamic mix and, like all dynamic mixes, it could potentially fall apart, or even explode.

At the same time, Popular Unity has managed to attract quite a few small organizations and individuals that come from the other direction of the political spectrum. It is not true that it is simply an alliance of left fragments.

We have a significant number of people — individuals mostly but also some small organizations — that do not come from the Left. They understand the importance of saying “No” to the policies of the bailout and the need for a national currency. They have been welcomed with open arms.

So including your right wing “sovereigntist” types, like ANEL?

Individuals from ANEL but, of course, not the party itself. I don't think there's any problem with that. This is a longstanding left-wing tradition. The Bolsheviks in Soviet Russia did the same thing after the revolution.

If the individuals have a consistent and honorable track record on the key issues and they're serious about their commitment to the political direction of the Popular Unity, that's fine.

The reason I'm asking the question is that, in France, this has taken a rather sharp form in the past few days. Jacques Sapir — a former student of Charles Bettelheim and one of the leading left economists, who is quite close to your position on the euro — followed Stefano Fassina's [2] call for the creation of what he describes as “an alliance of national liberation committees” against the euro and an end to “sectarian” refusals to create alliances with right-wing sovereigntist groups and with the National Front (who have of course cited Sapir and others in their anti-euro propaganda). What do you think about that?

Yes, I'm aware of that and I really don't know what came over Sapir, whom I've known for a long time. I can only explain it as a (I hope) temporary but very major lapse of some sort. I'm truly sorry about it. It's not a good development.

I would obviously differentiate between Stefano Fassina and Marine Le Pen. I think that the French and other European anti-euro and eurosceptic left forces should have nothing to do with the organized extreme right and certainly the fascist right.

They should build Chinese walls between them, and should refuse any kind of give-and-take with those people. The call that Sapir has made is a very bad mistake and the kind of thing that ruins one's political standing forever.

In the case of Greece, I hasten to add, things are a bit different. First, ANEL are not fascists and in any case Popular Unity has no truck with them as a party. Second, and more to the point, the Greek fascists, Golden Dawn, are actually turning tail on the question of the euro, contrary to what the rest of the European extreme right appears to be doing.

They are certainly talking about "National Production," I presume in corporatist form, which is what extreme rightists and fascists always do, but it is somehow going to happen in Greece without changing the national currency.

This is obviously nonsense, and it's quite interesting to remember that they used to make a lot of noise about the euro. In any case, they are now following a different line compared to the European extreme right, which makes life a lot easier for us.

Popular Unity are the only body in Greek politics which openly and clearly says that a radical program for Greece could not be implemented without a national currency. I would like to stress that the Communist Party is also not very brave on this issue, and is actually playing some shameful politics.

Indeed, the CP is fudging the issue in quite a unique way that would have been amusing, if it was not so bad. Presumably, the question of the euro will resolve itself in the way every other major social issue will resolve itself, namely with the rise of workers' power, perhaps after a socialist revolution.

In the meantime, apparently, exiting the EMU could be disastrous for workers, and so people should grit their teeth within the EMU and fight for socialism, which will eventually solve everything. This argument is sad not only because it is incoherent but also because the CP has very important forces that could be brought to bear in the struggles that lie ahead.

So what do you think are the prospects for Popular Unity? That all bets are off and anything could happen between now and the election, or that it has to admit it won't be forming the next government and therefore will have to play a different role, in opposition, to whatever government is formed?

I think you would have to be living on a different planet to believe that Popular Unity could form the next government in Greece. Forming a new government on the 21st of September is not what Popular Unity is about.

What really would be a great success would be to for Popular Unity to emerge as the third largest party in Greek politics, with a significant proportion of the votes, possibly in double digits. That would indicate a strong dynamic that could lead ultimately to power. After all, it would make no sense at all for Popular Unity to aim to be a party of opposition. It should target power in the short term.

The question is whether it will achieve this aim in the forthcoming election, and the evidence is very mixed. The first week or two after its formation were generally chaotic. People were confused, asking what was going on, and what exactly is Popular Unity? This is quite natural. In politics you

don't gain visibility and name recognition just because you appear on the scene.

In addition, during those early weeks, there have been enormous organizational problems — no institutional structure, no mechanisms and procedures, nothing. That has had an impact on democratic processes within the organization, and many key decisions have had to be made on an ad hoc basis. All that has been very difficult and many mistakes have been made, I have to say.

The critical period for Popular Unity will be the last two weeks before the election. It must do two things. First, come out with a clear programmatic statement that would help it become more visible. Working people want to be able to make a choice and come to a decision on a strong basis.

Second, make well-known people its public face, and thus gain credibility among the electorate in the little time that is left. I think that it has an excellent opportunity to become a decisive force in Greek politics, but it will depend very much on its own actions, on how it delivers in practice.

One of the immediate consequences of a good result for Popular Unity would be to deprive Syriza of an absolute majority and then they will have to choose coalition partners. Most likely, they will look to their right but, depending on how the chips fall, an alliance with Popular Unity may be their only option for staying in government. What would be the red lines of such a discussion?

Let me first of all say the reason why Syriza will probably not have a majority, never mind form a government by itself, is not Popular Unity, but the complete sellout by its leadership, which is beginning to be understood by the electorate very, very widely and is being registered in the polls.

It's not Popular Unity that is depriving Syriza of a majority but the astounding fact that a party of the Left that has promised so much has delivered practically nothing and in the end actually adopted wholesale the program of the opposition! When a party — especially of the Left — loses credibility in that way, it never really regains it.

Don't forget that Syriza exploded in the polls out of nothing, it has never had strong social and organizational foundations. It has been said many times that it could implode just as fast, and its sellout might well indicate that this process has started. That, however, leaves a practical political problem after the election. If Syriza can't form a government by itself, what will happen?

There are five main parties in parliament at the moment: Syriza, ANEL, New Democracy, which is the traditional party of the right, Pasok, which is the old social-democratic party, and To Potami, a new outfit that God knows what it stands for but which somehow positions itself as center-left.

All these parties have exactly the same program for the country, namely the new bailout program. You could not put a sheet of paper between them in that regard, and their only differences are about how best to implement the bailout.

It is easy to see, then, that after the election, no matter what these parties are saying now, there could be alliances among them to form government. It wouldn't surprise me at all if a government was actually formed between Syriza and New Democracy.

For, what are the programmatic differences between them? Such a government would obviously be a political Frankenstein and it wouldn't survive for very long because the bailout program is disastrous, but it might still come to pass. Similarly, it would surprise me even less if Syriza formed a coalition government with Pasok and To Potami.

Something like that will probably materialize, which would obviously be shameful for Syriza

supporters and members, but such is such becomes the life of politics when a sellout has been made.

For Popular Unity, if the issue of alliances came to the table, it should be against any kind of alliance with a party that has adopted a pro-bailout position. Syriza is beyond the pale, because its program is now the bailout.

I have no trust at all in its leadership and, as far as I'm concerned, Syriza is finished for the Left. Of course, not its members, voters, and supporters, but its leadership is dead and buried for the Left.

An alliance between Syriza and Popular Unity would also be a political Frankenstein and I wouldn't want to be around to witness it.

And you think that view is shared among Popular Unity leadership?

I would be very surprised if it wasn't shared. I would be very surprised.

One of the things that has emerged out of this shakeup is a certain realignment among the European left. We mentioned the declarations by Stefano Fassina. Jean-Luc Mélenchon as well has terminated his solidarity with Tsipras and welcomed the formation of Popular Unity and is now agitating for a European-wide Plan B conference with Oskar Lafontaine [3]. What do you think of those proposals and do they herald a realignment of the European left, with a greater clarity about the limitations of the European Union and EMU?

Yes, I think they do herald a new beginning, the reawakening of the European left from a very long slumber. I think the European left went on some kind of bad trip for several decades. It lost its bearings, it adopted lock, stock and barrel arguments that have essentially emanated from the ruling class.

It came to believe that the forms of political and other integration at the European level — the European Union, the monetary union — were somehow inherently progressive and what the Left needed to do was to improve them. It's almost as if the Left lost all memory of its historical past, of its place in European politics, its role in the history of Europe.

During this period it has been incredibly difficult to say to people, look, these institutions have been created by the capitalist class, they are not inherently good, we have to be critical of their very existence and not merely arguing about the sub-clauses of legislation.

It has been incredibly difficult, above all, to put alternative proposals on the table that disputed the existence of these institutions from a left-wing standpoint.

The experience of Syriza has shaken these Europeanist beliefs to the core. At long last, the Left of Europe, the leading radical thinkers and politicians in Europe, have begun to see what's going on.

I should hasten to add that [Oskar Lafontaine](#) has been fully aware of the direction taken by the monetary union long before Syriza sold the pass. Yet, it's a very important development that others have now come to a similar conclusion. It is very hopeful.

Still, I don't know whether we need a Europe-wide conference for a Plan B. I think more work needs to be done before that. The French left, the Spanish left, and especially the German left, need to come out with their own proposals about how to restructure the monetary system of Europe and what to do about the EU.

As socialists we don't want simply to go back to a system of competing national currencies. Our cornerstone is internationalism, but a kind of internationalism that is not contingent either on the European Union or on the European Monetary Union.

It is of paramount importance to have contributions that reflect national specificities on these questions. We've had proposals from Greece, but for a Europe-wide conference for a Plan B we would need a lot more from other countries. Holding a conference before such work has been done would be jumping the gun.

Perhaps I could draw a useful parallel with the [Zimmerwald Conference](#) following the outbreak of First World War. In some ways, what we see right now is the emergence of a Greek Zimmerwald left which might be a first step in forming a Europe-wide Zimmerwald left.

Syriza was a actually a political front with organizations holding many types of beliefs, and it fought elections on the basis of achieving radical change while remaining within the EU and the EMU, and even changing those! This project has, of course, proved impossible and a split has occurred within Syriza.

Popular Unity now argues that to implement a radical program it is necessary to reintroduce a national currency and to confront directly the EU. It is in favor of European solidarity, but on a different footing. This is a kind of Zimmerwald moment for the Greek left, and it might prove the beginning of a Europe-wide Zimmerwald left.

Holding a Europe-wide congress for a Plan B might be the moment when such a left would materialize, bringing again the promise of a socialist future. Let's prepare for it.

You have spent most of your adult life in the UK, I believe. So, you must be as surprised as the rest of us to see this thing which we had all thought dead and buried a long time ago, namely the Labour left, revived in old and yet new form around Jeremy Corbyn. As we know, the British Labour left has a complicated and not very happy relationship with the European debates: first of all opposing entry into the Common Market, but on a rather nationalist basis, and then switching over with many of the unions and so on into supporting the European Union as a sort of battered shield against Thatcherism and the Conservative Party's policies.

Now we see this new phenomenon around Corbyn, we see some journalists like Owen Jones talking about a "Lexit," a left-wing exit from at least the monetary union for those countries involved. Is there a chance finally, do you think, of shifting the terrain of the debate in the UK to a more healthy basis around Corbyn and the Left? Corbyn himself isn't particularly critical of the EU but there is the referendum coming up in the UK and we all thought it would be dominated by UKIP and the right wing forces. What do you think, from a sort of insider-outsider perspective?

I think Jeremy Corbyn represents a very hopeful development. First of all, his rise is a nice surprise, which is a very rare thing in politics. It's good to see that the Left in Labour is not dead yet, there's still life in it.

When I first came to Britain in the 1970s, the Labour left was very much alive and parts of it would not be out of place in a variety of Communist parties across continental Europe. Many of its people were very strong working-class Marxists. It then withered away and British politics became all the poorer for it, not to mention much duller.

But British society has continued to look for something fresh and new that would reject the dreary

old neoliberal stuff peddled by the mass media and so on. The social radicalism that is so manifest in Britain setting it apart from other European countries is searching for political radicalism.

It is apparent that this radicalism must have an integral eurosceptic component that would be sharply distinct from UKIP and the rest.

Ed Miliband, despite his own personal predilections, never succeeded in providing an answer, although I see that some of his people are very active in the Corbyn campaign, so clearly there is some continuity.

For some reason that I don't really understand, Jeremy Corbyn appears to have touched a sensitive spot, including among the youth. Mysterious are the ways of British politics.

Be that as it may, it represents a great opportunity, but it would result in something sustainable only if the eurosceptic terrain is appropriated by left-wing radicalism. Britain needs a set of policies that would restructure the economy and bring about a deep redistribution of income and wealth, while being critical of the very existence of the EMU and the EU.

It seems to me that only on that basis could promising and interesting things happen in British politics. Britain has a lot to offer to the rest of Europe in this regard because it has kept out of the disaster of monetary union, and the British people do not suffer from the blind Europeanism that one often finds in continental Europe. I do not wish to denigrate the baleful impact of British parochialism but, believe me, ardent Europeanism could be worse.

It's not clear to me whether Corbyn has either sufficient leadership vision, or the mental and theoretical makeup to deliver what is necessary. But some of the people in his team are very good — top notch — and I'm sure that they could jointly deliver the jolt that British politics needs.

I would ask them to look more closely at Greece because they can learn from its experience and strengthen their case, but they would have steer well clear of Syriza, which expresses nothing progressive any more.

It's possible to accept and agree with you entirely that the questions of the currency and monetary union are the key link in the chain in the present conjuncture without accepting necessarily that it is the only question of importance in Greek politics or European politics. And there have been a certain number of criticisms of you from the left that the focus and the way you presented your arguments for Grexit don't clearly articulate Grexit to anything that would be associated with some kind of left, or socialist, or emancipatory program.

Of course, one response is that this is an emergency program and we can talk about these other questions later (although we know that stageism is a problem in politics). And another response would be to say that yes, Costas Lapavistas was arguing this in a context where he was in Syriza and the key question was try to legitimate the debate around Plan B on a national level and not just talk to people on the Left, but now the lines have moved.

And I think there still is a question in some people's minds that says, ok, we agree with Grexit, but what is the connection between Grexit and positive social change? Your argument up until now has been it's the necessary but not sufficient condition, which is fine, but then should it not be articulated to other things, other demands, other processes, that are not deferred to some indefinite horizon?

Let me say that I don't accept this criticism. I don't accept any part of it, and it's not because I'm stubborn. Much of this criticism still simply doesn't get what is happening in Europe. Sorry to be so

brutal and upfront but it's the reality.

From the very first moment, back in 2010, when I spoke about Grexit, I said that there could be two types of exit, progressive and conservative. Exit could certainly happen in a conservative way, they could even roll the tanks out. But I have always said that this has nothing to do with the Left, whose aim must be to achieve progressive exit.

A key point in this respect is that the monetary union and the currency are a focal point of class conflict in Greece and in a lot of other European countries. Class politics is integral to the euro debate.

The Left should aim to change the currency not because it has a fetish about money, but because it appreciates that money is the pinnacle of a set of institutions representing class and, the case of the euro, national domination. To change the currency there would have to be class struggle that would alter these institutions and implement social change.

This is at core an argument about the rebirth of the Left in Europe and the re-founding of socialism for the 21st century. That has always been the project for me.

Changing the currency in Greece and altering the monetary arrangements of Europe would require so many things to be changed that it would offer the chance of profound social transformation in favour of labor and against capital.

To be more specific, to change the currency, it would be necessary to have a debt write-off. But a debt write-off is a class question par excellence as well as bringing to the fore the question of dominant and subordinate countries in Europe.

To change the currency, it would also be necessary to lift austerity. But lifting austerity means attacking finance capital and reversing financialization in a most decisive way. It also means altering the direction of fiscal policy to serve the interests of the working people by reducing unemployment. These are class issues again.

To change the currency, it would further be necessary to nationalize the banks and put them under proper public administration, while implementing a debt write-off for household and business debts. This is again a class issue.

To change the currency, not least, would require a development program for Greece that would redirect development away from the problematic path of financialization and would restrengthen agricultural and industrial production. That again is a matter of class struggle that ought to be resolved in the interests of labor.

To change the currency, finally, it would be necessary to transform the state to allow intervention in the economy in the interests of labor, while strengthening democratic rights.

More broadly, for a progressive change of the currency, it would be necessary to create a new set of relations among European powers that would move beyond the confines of the essentially diseased European Union.

Europe needs new monetary relations that are not based on competition among nations but nor do they reproduce the diseased practices of the monetary union. That would provide a fresh basis for economic and social solidarity in Europe.

Okay but there's one thing you missed in that list of measures. It could be criticized as a

statist, top down conception of what a socialist path would be. And you've been attacked by people in, for example, the Argentinean left who say, "We had devaluation and currency changes here which led to social and political disaster".

Don't you think, now you're free from defending the Syriza perspective and are now in Popular Unity, there is more room to talk about self-organization, self-emancipation, self-activity of workers and popular classes in Greece and not just the question of the state acting in those interests? Don't you think a more interesting dialectic could be sketched out now that you don't have to defend the position of Syriza as a whole?

Well, I couldn't agree with you more.

But you don't spell it out. You seem to think it's too obvious to mention.

Let me spell it out now, then. I personally and the people I've collaborated with have always argued for progressive exit to happen with explicit and active popular participation.

We need popular participation for progressive exit because we need people to be aware of what's happening, to support it, to form collective bodies of their own, and to be active in implementing the change.

For me that is not a matter of dispute. I belong to a tradition that has always argued for socialism from below. I haven't changed my mind on that. We could never have socialism from the top.

But, having said that, we still have an important dimension here that has to do with the nature of money. You see, money is a very peculiar phenomenon that crystallizes the spirit of capitalism in unexpected ways.

With money, you can have local and particularistic versions of it that would allow for social solidarity, transcending markets, strengthening the spirit of cohesion and community. These are very good things and elements of them could be found in "green" money, "time" money, and so on. But, with money, there is also the overarching, single entity that keeps the market together. The nexus rerum, as Marx said, the glue that also keeps the capitalist society together.

There is no replacing that function of money in a simple way, or in any way at all short of transforming capitalist society altogether. It follows that we need monetary solutions that would apply to society as a whole, and this means at the level of the state. They could never happen merely at the level of the community, or of the local.

In short, we certainly need initiatives about exiting the euro that would involve the grassroots, but they must also happen at the level of society as a whole, of the state, otherwise the problem would never be solved.

To be specific, we need a new central bank; we need a new foreign exchange policy; we need a new reserve policy. These could never be produced at the level of a community. So the Left needs to marry the two dimensions. But then this has always been a key task for socialists.

In Europe today, a continent that is being suffocated by a diseased monetary system, we have to answer it in practice, we have to hack a path through the conceptual and practical undergrowth.

P.S.

* “Don’t Count on Merkel”. Jacobin. 9.9.15:

Jacobin-><https://www.jacobinmag.com/2015/09/grexit-popular-unity-eurozone-bailout-drachma/>

* Sebastian Budgen is an editor at Historical Materialism. Costas Lapavitsas is a member of the Hellenic Parliament for Popular Unity.

Footnotes

[1] Available on ESSF (article 34600), [Greece: Phase Two – Which way forward?](#).

[2] Fassina is an MP for the left of the Democratic Party in Italy and former deputy finance minister

[3] <http://www.jean-luc-melenchon.fr/20...>