**Left Nationalism and the Struggle against EU Neoliberalism: Opportunities and Challenges**

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“[C]osmopolitan ideologies obscure the possibilities contained in national politics and avoid the complex task of linking them to the possibilities for international solidarity and action, preferring instead to affect a dangerous disdain for the national – treating it as practically synonymous with the chauvinistic” (Desai, 2013: 17).

“Having the same currency as the most advanced countries has a tremendous power over people’s imagination” (Kouvelakis, 2016: 45).

Introduction: opposition to EU integration, the Left-Right divide and the national question

Euroscepticism is clearly not the sole preserve of the political Right – though the left-wing variant is rather more nuanced than its right-wing counterpart. Based on survey data from across the EU collected between 2008 and 2014, van Elsas *et al* (2016) note that left-wing opposition to the EU tends to take the form of rejecting the current policies and practices of the EU rather than rejecting the idea of European integration in principle (the latter tends to be the case with right-wing opponents).

This left-wing rejection is rooted in egalitarian attitudes and is associated with a preference for redistributive economic policies. Indeed, survey respondents identifying as left-wing were found to be, on average, *more* dissatisfied with the current form of the EU than were right-wing respondents. The van Elsas *et al* study did not find that all left-wing citizens were immune from cultural chauvinism as a driver of anti-EU attitudes, but rather that those on the Left were clearly distinguished from their right-wing counterparts by the extent to which it was their socio-economic egalitarian impulses that drove their opposition to the EU.

In similar vein, Ramiro (2016), using cross-European data from 1989 to 2009, found that people who believed EU membership to be negative for their country were more likely than others to vote for a party of the radical Left. Again, the point is not that opposition to the EU is exclusively or automatically left-wing – rather, it is that left-wing opposition exists and that harnessing it can help build support for left-wing parties. In fact, this should be an unsurprising conclusion: Gomez *et al* (2015: 10), in their study of party manifestos, found that negative attitudes to the EU (and its predecessors) have long constituted a very prominent distinguishing characteristic of radical Left parties. More significantly, March and Rommerskirchen (2015) found that expressions of Euroscepticism tended to impact *positively* on the electoral performance of radical Left parties.[[1]](#footnote-1)

Note that Ramiro’s finding (above) referred to people’s views of how EU membership impacted on their *country*. That, in turn, begs the question of the relationship between left-wing sentiment, nationalism and attitudes to the EU. The important point here is that most left-wingers have not, for the most part, abandoned (or moved beyond) nationalism – it is, rather, that they define nationalism in different terms to their right-wing counterparts. Halikiopoulou *et al* (2012) emphasise the left-wing tradition of ‘civic nationalism’, through which the national interest is identified with the interests of the popular classes, whose economic interests in particular are seen as threatened by both national and foreign elites.[[2]](#footnote-2) Left-wingers tend to “perceive the EU as a vehicle for elite and great power domination at the expense of the popular classes” (*ibid*: 512; see also van Elsas and van der Brug, 2015). By contrast, right-wing Euroscepticism tends to be rooted in ethno-nationalism based on the EU’s claimed role in the erosion of national independence *per se* and of the nation’s putative cultural ‘values’.[[3]](#footnote-3)

To return to a point made earlier, this helps explain why right-wing opposition to the EU tends to be more ‘existential’ in nature – insofar as European political integration (as distinct from the economic liberalisation of the Single Market programme) inevitably dilutes cultural specificities and national independence, it is, for the Right, to be opposed *tout court*. Whereas the threat that the EU is seen as posing to the economic interests of the popular classes (which is the principal basis of left-wing opposition) could, in theory at least, be neutralised by reforming the EU in such a way as to advance egalitarian and redistributive goals, including through more democratic political governance of the liberalised Single Market (van Elsas *et al*, 2016; see also below).

Within Europe’s left-wing circles, a critical, and hugely topical, question thus becomes: *can* the EU be reformed so as to become a more democratic and economically progressive governance framework? More specifically, can governance of the *Eurozone* be so reformed? Or does the implementation of progressive economic policies instead require countries to *exit* the Euro?

Lexit?

For a growing number of commentators, the answer to that last question is a resounding ‘yes’. Thus, for example, French economist Frederic Lordon (2015: 1) bluntly states that “The Euro radically precludes any possibility of progressive policies”.[[4]](#footnote-4) He bases this claim, in part, on the experience of the Syriza-led government in Greece in its attempts to negotiate with the EU (and other creditor institutions) in 2015.

The central dilemma (or weakness, depending on how one views it) of the Syriza position was that they wished to renegotiate the austerity strategy being inflicted on the Greek people by the ‘troika’ (the EU Commission, the European Central Bank (ECB) and the IMF; with the EU council standing behind them) while at the same time remaining a member of the Eurozone. Thus, despite being granted an overwhelming popular mandate against austerity in a July 2015 referendum, Syriza responded to a threat from the German Finance Minister that Greece would be expelled from the Eurozone (and to the ECB’s shutting down of liquidity to Greek banks) by conceding to creditor demands (Heilig, 2016: 15-6).

For Lapavitsas (2015), writing before the referendum, the crux of the matter was clear: “lenders have used the framework of the Eurozone to create a liquidity and funding shortage that has crippled the Greek side”. As a representative of Syriza’s Left Platform, Lapavitsas instead urged the government to exit the Eurozone in order to “free the country from the trap of the common currency”. To the Syriza leadership, this proved an unthinkable (or at least unacceptable) option, with the party’s Finance Minister stating hyperbolically that Greece leaving the Euro would see a return to the conditions of the 1930s (Kouvelakis, 2016: 46; see also Nikolakakis, 2016).

The commitment to continued membership of the Eurozone is not confined to the radical Left leadership in Greece. In 2015, the leader of Spain’s Podemos party, Pablo Iglesias, stated:

“We do not like the way the euro has been built… but we think that the euro is now impossible to do without. Certainly, we have to improve the way that the single currency is managed, and we think that there should be democratic control of this, but we are not partisans of leaving the euro… Even if we don’t like the way the ECB works, we accept [that Spain should remain] in the Eurozone” (in Lordon, 2015: 6).

While the prospects of Podemos forming a government in Spain now appear to have receded, the above makes clear that any future government there led by the radical Left would be unlikely to countenance a voluntary rupture with the single currency (Heilig, 2016: 26; Kouvelakis, 2016: 69). Of radical parties with some realistic prospect of wielding state power, only Italy’s Five Stars movement (and by no means all would define this as a party of the Left) calls for a referendum on exiting the Eurozone (Watkins, 2016: 20).

The limitations of EuroReform proposals

The former Greek Finance Minister, Yanis Varoufakis, has responded to Syriza’s failures/defeats by subsequently setting up a movement called Democracy in Europe.[[5]](#footnote-5) Its central call is for democratisation of the EU itself, arguing that no national government can implement progressive policies so long as it remains straitjacketed by the undemocratic, neoliberal structures and policies of the EU.

Varoufakis’ proposed solution is not, however, for countries to exit the Eurozone or the EU but, rather, to radically reform European integration into a much more progressive political and economic governance framework (Navarro, 2016), thus sidestepping (or superseding) the dilemma Syriza faced between Eurozone membership and anti-democratic austerity.

Varoufakis is, therefore, to some extent in the tradition of Left Euroscepticism that identifies the problem as the *current* nature of European integration rather than the principle of integration itself (see above; and van Elsas *et al*, 2016). But he is faced with a very practical problem: how is the reform he envisages to be brought about, and by whom?

The answer (implicitly) afforded to those last questions by Wolfgang Streeck[[6]](#footnote-6) (and many others) is that such reform simply *cannot* feasibly be brought about because there is no capacity or agency at the European level to make it happen (see also Fassina, 2016). Streeck (2014: 217) asks:

“can what would amount to nothing less than a revolution be achieved through reform, within a framework of institutional continuity? Who would sit at the convention that would have to break with the present and embark on a new and better future, if not the interminable Giscards, van Rompuys, Barrosos, Junkers *e tuttti quanti*?”

Where, Streeck reasonably demands, is “a market-correcting European-democratic politics” (*ibid*: 218) going to come from when the current anti-democratic, neoliberal dogmas are now enshrined in the legal DNA of the EU itself (Storey, 2014), backed up by the powers of the unelected ECB and Commission and buttressed by the rulings of the European Court of Justice (ECJ). These, furthermore, could only be changed by the *unanimous* agreement of all member country governments.

Nationalism *redux*?

Streeck goes on to make the point that the most important channels of oppositional politics in Europe –voting, striking and otherwise protesting – “remain firmly anchored at the national level” (Streeck, 2014: 219). Yes, there have been examples of cross-European strikes and protests against EU neoliberalism (Storey, 2014), and voting for the European Parliament is not an irrelevant act, but the fact remains that the overwhelming site of political struggle in Europe remains determinedly national.

This national focus can be a serious *problem* for the Left: for example, when workers’ rights are attacked at the supranational level through ECJ rulings and other measures, a nationally based response on the part of the trade unions is obviously inadequate (Dribbusch, 2015; Erne, 2015; Horn, 2012).

And yet, might this also be an *opportunity* for the Left? If one accepts the arguments of Lordon, Lapavitsas and others that exit from the Eurozone at least (and perhaps from the EU as a whole) is a *sine qua non* for the implementation of progressive politics, then the mobilisation for such an exit must, almost by definition, be primarily national.[[7]](#footnote-7) And this is where, arguably, the Left’s tradition of civic or inclusionary nationalism as the basis of its Euroscepticism (see above) becomes a potentially important resource.

Indeed, one might even go further – the failure of the Left to articulate an inclusive national programme that explicitly challenges EU neoliberalism has surrendered the political field to right-wing Euroscepticism. It is the National Front in France and the United Kingdom Independence Party in the UK which have been best able to make political capital in their countries from a rising tide of hostility to the EU. Tariq Ali (2016), amongst others, argues that Jeremy Corbyn’s failure to campaign for Brexit in the UK on left-wing grounds has proven a mistake: he was trying to keep his Europhile parliamentary Labour party united[[8]](#footnote-8) but has ended up with them turning on him anyway, while the Right was left to frame the Brexit debate in largely ethno-nationalist, exclusionary terms (especially vis-à-vis immigration).

Going back to the more specific issue of exiting the Euro, Lordon (2015: 8) notes that “In a sort of unconscious self-realisation syndrome, the Europeanist Left seems to be devoting all its efforts to making sure that only the far-Right exit door is left open”. This not only wastes the (albeit constrained, see below) opportunity the present conjuncture offers to build Left support on the basis of a radical anti-EU platform, it also fosters (or at least opens the door to) the growth of xenophobic movements that will only deepen the crisis facing those, especially migrants and ethnic minorities, already most excluded and oppressed by EU policies (Human Rights Watch, 2016; Rajas, 2015).

The enduring appeal of the Euro

There is a compelling logic at work here for those on the Left who are highly critical of an increasingly authoritarian and neoliberal EU. An inclusionary nationalism, pitting the bulk of a country’s population against the diktats of the supranational state and its local elite allies, provides potentially fertile ground for a radical (civic nationalist) Left movement to not only build its own programme for progressive reform, but also to undercut the forces of reactionary ethno-nationalism that currently dominate anti-EU discourses and campaigns.

And yet, there are also very severe impediments to such a project. The quote at the start of this paper from Kouvelakis (2016: 45) refers to the grip Eurozone membership, especially, continues to exert on the popular imaginations of people in countries including Greece, Spain and Portugal. The same writer adverts to the way in which that membership has come to be seen, by many in those countries, as a badge of ‘modernity’, of democracy, of membership of the ‘West’ more generally. Himself a member (like Lapavitsas) of Syriza’s Left Platform, he concedes that “those of us who’d been in favour of exiting the euro since the start of the crisis tended to underestimate” this popular appeal (*ibid*: 46).

Popular support for the Euro is extraordinarily high and it can be argued that many (perhaps even most) Greek people, in particular, wanted continued Euro membership even at the price of their continued immiserisation at the hands of the Troika.[[9]](#footnote-9) Certainly the capitulation of the Syriza leadership did not occur in a vacuum. According to Eurobarometer survey data collected in May 2015, 69 per cent of Greeks supported the single currency, with only 29 per cent against.[[10]](#footnote-10) The equivalent figures at that time for the Eurozone as a whole were 69-25, for Italy 59-30, for Portugal 62-31, for Spain 61-31, and for Ireland 70-14.[[11]](#footnote-11)

A poll taken in Greece in June 2015 (i.e., closer to the July referendum date) found that some 56 per cent of Greeks wanted to stay in the Eurozone even if it meant the continuation of severe austerity measures.[[12]](#footnote-12) One can interpret (at a stretch) the 5 July referendum result as an implicit popular acceptance of the need for a rupture with the Euro (Lordon, 2015: 8) but, if so, it was a decision taken with great reluctance.

There is a certain irony at work here: it may be easier to build support for exiting the EU as a whole (as a predominantly right-wing movement was able to do in the UK, and which Le Pen might yet be able to push for in the case of France) than to build support for the narrower objective of exiting the Euro in those countries that are already members of the Eurozone and which, like Greece, have been hardest hit by EU-driven debt and austerity policies. Escaping from “the trap of the common currency” (Lapavitsas, 2015) is no easy task in those circumstances.

Conclusion: the politics of persuasion and risk

Lordon accepts the constraint that public (pro-Euro) sentiment places on the policy options open to left-wing parties. But he (2015: 8) also makes the important point that “politics means getting to grips with public opinion: to listen to it and also to speak to it”. It is in *speaking* to public opinion (in the sense of engaging in the task of political persuasion) that left-wing parties may be able to square the circle of, on the one hand, widespread (if often inchoate) hostility to the EU and its policies (the fertile ground for the growth of a left nationalist project) and, on the other, deep popular attachment (the marshy ground in which the left nationalist project might sink) to some of the still treasured dimensions of integration.

Those latter dimensions include the Euro especially, but also privileges such as free movement (for most EU citizens) across EU borders and progressive EU regulations in areas such as environmental standards and (limited, belated) measures against tax avoidance (such as the recent Commission tax ruling against the Apple corporation in Ireland).

Cognizant of those positive aspects, a left nationalist project in (for the sake of argument) an indebted Eurozone country would probably not *start* from a position of calling for Euro or EU exit. It would more likely start from the position that rules prejudicial to the popular classes (including the Fiscal Treaty’s deficit and debt stipulations) would be ignored and, where necessary, overridden. The fact that Spain, Portugal and Italy have all recently been given leeway regarding their fiscal policy targets shows that progressive breaking/flouting (or selective enforcement) of EU rules is an envelope that can be pushed to a certain extent at least (Young, 2016). (By contrast, rulings favourable to the majority of citizens would not be contested; the ruling that Apple should pay back-tax to the Irish government is a topical example).

But delaying the strict implementation of the fiscal rules will not be enough to radically transform society in a more justice-orientated direction. Measures such as the cancellation of illegitimate debt will also be required and, here, resistance from, especially, the ECB is unlikely to be avoided. What would distinguish the type of Left nationalist project being discussed here is that the exit option (from the Euro in the first instance) would have to be on the table if the ECB sought to coerce a country back into line.

In the words of Irish economist Kevin O’Rourke (2015), the lesson of the Syriza debacle is:

“negotiating with Germany is a waste of time; be willing to act unilaterally, be willing to default unilaterally, have a plan for achieving primary surplus if you haven’t already achieved it, have a hard default and euro exit… option in your back pocket, and be willing to use it at the first sign of hassle from the ECB”.

That would be a high-risk political strategy but at least the gambit would provide a country and a Left movement pushing back against an authoritarian and neoliberal EU with a significant bargaining chip.

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1. Interestingly, this finding was largely based on pre-crisis data. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. There is a parallel here with the idea of “inclusionary populism”, as coined by Stavrakis and Katsambekis (2014: 138) to describe the pre-2015 discourse of Syriza in Greece. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Often based on a yearning for a “regressive arcadia”, a mythical past of national greatness (Tokatlian, 2016). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. See also <http://lexit-network.org/>, to which I am a signatory. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. <https://diem25.org/> [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. He was actually replying to Jurgen Habermas at the time. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Of course a number of countries could choose to leave the Eurozone on a coordinated and negotiated basis, or the whole edifice could even be dismantled by all its members, but the political momentum for such an outcome is still likely to be generated by national movements campaigning for greater policy freedom at the national level. The same is probably true for any half-way house scenario, such as the conversion of the Euro into a ‘common clearing currency’ while individual countries (re)introduced separate currencies for fiscal purposes (e.g., Amato *et al*, 2016). [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/politics/jeremy-corbyn-would-be-campaigning-for-brexit-if-he-was-not-labour-leader-says-long-time-ally-tariq-a7032736.html> [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Doubtless many also believed that exiting the Eurozone would have caused even *greater* misery. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. <http://data.europa.eu/euodp/en/data/dataset/S2099_83_3_STD83_ENG> [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. <http://data.europa.eu/euodp/en/data/dataset/S2099_83_3_STD83_ENG> [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. <http://greece.greekreporter.com/2015/06/16/poll-7-in-10-greeks-want-the-euro-at-any-cost/> [↑](#footnote-ref-12)