

Greece: The myth of the revival of classical democracy in Athens^[1]

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In his article entitled, “This is classic democracy”^[2] Costas Douzinas provides an idealised view of the movement of the *aganaktismenoi* (outraged) in Greece, which has very little to do with reality and even less to do with classic democracy. As this has wider political implications, given that a similar movement (*indignados*) has risen and has already been phased out, with no tangible political effects in Spain, and a similar future seems to be awaiting the Greek “movement”, it may be worth considering in greater detail what seems to be the new dream of the reformist Left as regards the political subject in the fight against neoliberal globalisation — following the demise of their previous, similar dream with respect to the now defunct World Social Forum, or the inevitable marginalisation of various forms of local democracy (Porto Alegre, Marinaleda etc). In fact, some within the same Left already present the “movement” that has emerged everywhere from Tahrir to Syntagma Square as “a European and world alliance of the peoples, a deep social radicalism which could overturn the neoliberal nightmare”.^[3]

Douzinas writes that “in Syntagma the parallels with the classical Athenian agora, which met a few hundred metres away, are striking... The speakers stick to strict two-minute slots to allow as many as possible to contribute... This is democracy in action. The views of the unemployed and the professor are given equal time, discussed with equal vigour and put to the vote”.

Although it is true that speakers are given two-minute slots, it is untrue that the views of the unemployed and the professor are given equal time. The “experts” who are (eventually) invited by the assembly to express their views on crucial issues like the causes of the Greek economic crisis and the possible way out of it are, in fact, given multiple time slots to do so (amounting to at least fifteen minutes for each of their main speeches, followed by five-minute slots to answer each question). And rightly so, given that no one could seriously develop an argument within a two-minute slot (a TV time slot, as it was described) and without the right to respond to points raised as a result of his/her intervention—the time allocated to “commoners”. Therefore the assembly members are, in effect, only given the time to approve or disapprove what the experts suggest and the assembly is easily amenable to manipulation by these “experts”.

However, the modern manipulation of direct democracy does not stop there.

In classical democracy, the agenda of the *ekklesia* was in the hands of a council called the *boule*, a body of 500 men who were chosen — by lot — from the *ekklesia* and who served for just one year. Furthermore, all those qualifying as citizens could participate in the *ekklesia*, with this qualification being restricted so as to exclude mainly women and slaves, as is well known — although we should not forget that the abolition of slavery and the end of women’s

disenfranchisement are very recent historical phenomena!

In the present parody of classical democracy the agenda and, crucially, the list of “experts” to be invited to speak at the assembly are determined by committees whose membership is “open to everybody,” and are then rubber-stamped by the popular assembly. Furthermore, there have been serious allegations that crucial committees, like the one determining the procedure through which the all-important economic crisis was to be discussed, were being manipulated by members of well-known Left parties (posing as ordinary citizens). These allegations have been confirmed by the fact that most of the experts chosen belonged to a particular front organisation of the reformist Left, who have been heavily promoting the view that the way out of the crisis is to appoint a committee to carry out a debt audit in order to establish whether banks lent money to Greece responsibly.[4] The expectation is, of course, that at least some of the debt will be found to be “illegitimate,” and can therefore be repudiated — an impractical as well as theoretically-flawed method for dealing with the structural economic problems of Greece, which led to the present explosion of debt.[5]

The obvious conclusion is that, if classical democracy suffered from the demagogues, the modern attempt at creating a direct democracy suffers from an even more important problem: that such a democracy has to co-exist with representative democracy, i.e. an institutional framework that is intrinsically hostile to direct democracy. This means that Douzinas’s implied proposition, that “the outraged have shown that parliamentary democracy must be supplemented with its more direct version,” is unviable. In fact, representative democracy is as incompatible with direct democracy — if the latter is properly conceived as a form of polity rather than just as a procedure — as ever.

It remains the case that the outraged represent the broader political significance of the “peaceful insurrection”. Douzinas’s conclusion that it has already been “the greatest anti-austerity achievement in Europe so far” is already outdated, and the Greek Parliament is shortly expected to approve the worst austerity measures imposed on any country in Europe or beyond, which are to be accompanied by the enforced sale of every public asset in Greece at a bargain price, in order to satisfy the country’s creditors. This clearly shows that unless this movement adopts a political project with concrete goals and means of achieving them, it will soon be either integrated into the system or marginalised by it, as have been all the other movements I mentioned above.

[1] This article was first submitted for publication in the “Comment is Free” column of the well-known newspaper of the British liberal Left, *The Guardian*, in response to an article by one of its protégés in the Greek Liberal Left. Of course, the Guardian declined publication, confirming once more how “free” comment is in this newspaper.

[2] Costas Douzinas, “This is classic democracy”, *The Guardian* (16/6/2011).

[3] Declaration signed by over 100 Greek intellectuals of the liberal Left in *Eleftherotypia* (16/6/2011).

[4] This is the disorienting systemic view promoted by the “stars” of the Greek liberal Left Costas Lapavitsas, Costas Douzinas et al, both of them, as well as a film, in which they star and is heavily promoted by the Guardian, “Debtocracy” (see e.g. [Aditya Chakraborty](#) “Debtocracy: the samizdat of Greek debt”, *Guardian*, 9/6/2011) and in which no word is uttered about the role of the integration of Greece

into the EU in leading to the present crisis. Needless to add that the EU is funding both the liberal Left front organisation mentioned in the text, as well as the best-seller film on debtocracy:

http://www.inclusivedemocracy.org/brochures/2011.06.09__exeftelismos_amesis_dimokratias.html

[5] Takis Fotopoulos, "Greece: The implosion of the systemic crisis," *The International Journal of INCLUSIVE DEMOCRACY*, Vol. 5, No. 4 / Vol. 6, No. 1 (Autumn 2009 / Winter 2010):

http://www.inclusivedemocracy.org/journal/vol6/vol6_no1_takis_Greece_the_implosion_of_the_systemic_crisi