

## Interview with Helena Sheehan by Nikos Agourous for Huffington Post Greece

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### Helena Sheehan: SYRIZA self-destructs

From her youth, Irish philosopher and historian Helena Sheehan admired ancient Athens, both its democracy and Socratic dialogues. In a rich academic life, she has explored philosophy of history and Marxist theory. In the 1990s she traveled often to our country with her partner Sam Nolan, secretary of Dublin Council of Trade Unions and political activist. She discovered the world of the Greek left and the birth of Synaspismos.

The similarities and differences of the 2008 financial crisis affecting both Ireland and Greece mobilised her interest in an experiential study of the phenomenon of Syriza. She explains in the introduction to her book *The Syriza Wave: Surging and Crashing with the Greek Left* that she put the weight of the book on the period after July 2015 “not only the least known part of the story, but the saddest part of the sad story”. Two years after the electoral victory of Syriza, our discussion with Sheehan attempts to summarise the reasons behind the colossal failure and to trace the current context, in which the EU is decomposing on terms of the right rather than of the left. The greatest interest, however, is found in Sheehan's book, which records and interprets the tragedy of political defeat, violating the moral mandate and leading to deadlock.

**NA:** Have you concluded as to which variables had definitive effect on Syriza's rise to power and why the time was ripe for a party like Syriza to gain the capacity to get elected?

**HS:** Above all, it was the weight of the crisis, the increasingly unendurable effects of the expropriation of personal and collective wealth, that was primarily responsible for the rising tide of resistance and the search for an alternative path. It was also the strong traditions of the Greek left, combining a formidable history of struggle with a fluidity able to adapt to new forces coming into that struggle.

**NA:** The very core of Syriza's message for rising to power was built on protest politics against European and national elites, market capitalism, as well as on the popular discourse of the dichotomy on memorandum (pro/anti). Yet, after Tsipras signed the Third Bailout agreement with Greece's international creditors and won national elections, he offered an alternative narrative of a left management of the crisis. Do you think that this has been merely an act of opportunism and political survival after a colossal failure, based on a political wave that was still powerful?

**HS:** It was primarily a response to defeat, at least at first. Those who built Syriza really wanted to set upon an alternative path, beginning with ending the oppression and domination of the memoranda and embarking on a protracted process of transforming capitalism in the direction of socialism. Even after July 2015, there were those and there still are those who believe they are somehow moving in this direction. Personally I could not support the decision of Tsipras to sign the 3<sup>rd</sup> memorandum, but I still supported those in Syriza who did accept this. Only in August 2015, when a general election was called effectively to purge the left of Syriza did I find it impossible to support Syriza. I think their alternative narrative of left management of the crisis has been increasingly implausible and indefensible. I think that the leadership of Syriza has become increasingly opportunist and cynical. They seem keen to hold on to government power, no matter what. The vote they managed to get in September 2015 was so different from the vote in January 2015. I was in Greece at the time of the 2<sup>nd</sup> election and the only reason anyone seemed to have for voting for them was that they didn't want ND again to form a government. They were the only alternatives they saw. I was very disappointed that Laiki Enotita didn't get into parliament. There is still a great longing for an alternative in Greek society, but it has been dampened by defeat and despair.

**NA:** What is your understanding of the bizarre sequence of Tsipras calling the Greek people to reject EU/IMF austerity measures and then pursuing even harsher austerity with an outlook of debt relief? Tsipras government has been performing a bipolar role regarding IMF and Germany led EU. When it comes to debt restructuring Tsipras supported the IMF as a moderate broker. When it came to further pension cut and speed up of privatizations, he backed the EU block. Do you believe that there is any sort of political strategy behind this tactic that sets to exploit the alleged differences between IMF and Germany or a product of mere improvisations?

**HS:** To be honest, I don't think there is much strategic thinking anymore. I think they are stumbling from crisis to crisis in a trajectory that is riddled with every kind of contradiction.

**NA:** Two years since 2015 elections Syriza has indeed become a vortex of despair as not only it has intensified austerity measures that consistently break down the social safety net but it also has failed in governing in a way that encourages collective ethos and fights corruption. Do you think that this is a result of the existential theoretical and political contradictions that led to a self-destructive phase or a failure to transcend those contradictions into realpolitik?

**HS:** Both. The one is the foundation of the other.

**NA:** Syriza's obsession with the media, as well as, with its polemic discourse of providing justice to the chronic corruption and scandals of Metapolitefsi hasn't produced any concrete results. In fact many analysts emphasize Tsipras's administration have only sought to produce media narratives that would increase its political and media influence while downplaying the continuing damage of austerity. Do you agree with the regime aspirations attributed to Tsipras government? How has Syriza as a party responded?

**HS:** Their media narrative has diverged further and further from the realities of life as experienced by the Greek people. I entitled the final chapter of my book "Talking Left, Walking Right" and dealt with it in much detail.

**NA:** Syriza led coalition with Independent Greeks is increasingly utilizing a blend of nationalism, turning the blind eye to Golden Dawn's anti-immigrant mobilization. What is your opinion about this peculiar tolerance?

**HS:** I think the initial alliance with Anel was an unfortunate necessity. Now it seems that XA is becoming bolder again now after pulling back after the arrests of 2013. I am surprised that Syriza cannot even take this under control. I am appalled that they haven't taken control of policing and have been so passive in the face of old forces, whom they defeated on one level and then allowed to carry on as they pleased.

**NA:** Seven years and still the Greek crisis is delivering collective damage, pain and no alternative to the Greek people. The crisis has produced a new normality to which the Left following Syriza's colossal failure seems irrelevant and unable to offer any alternatives. Are you pessimistic about the prospect of Greece recovering and the Left leading such recovery?

**HS:** The left is in serious disarray since mid-2015, but I still have faith in the Greek left and their capacity to reconfigure and take the initiative toward a new path. I don't know how long that will take, but it is urgent to get it together. I am not exactly optimistic at the moment, but I am hopeful.

**NA:** Nowadays, when far-right parties around Europe are exploiting both the failure of EU institutions and the populist anti-elite discourse that utilizes, among other things, xenophobia, is there a thing as a leftist EU of social justice that supposedly aspires Syriza?

**HS:** I think of the EU as I do of the nation state. They are public sector institutions (even if dominated by the interests of the private sector) and these are arena in which we must struggle for power. The resources they manage belong to us. The real issue is the balance of forces. We cannot transform the EU (which would ultimately entail cancelling all existing treaties and restructuring it radically) without winning support for our vision of what the international public sector should be and we are not succeeding in doing that. However, the situation is volatile and the EU is coming apart, unfortunately more on the terms of the right than the left.

**NA:** Every day the global political order is becoming more volatile as there is more evidence of growing inequality and slowing of productivity growth and liberal democracy becomes more intolerant. Do you think we are facing, as some argue, a growing asymmetry between liberal democracy and global capitalism?

**HS:** There was always an asymmetry between liberal democracy and global capitalism, but yes it is accelerating.

**NA:** Some people argue that PASOK during the 1980s understood and utilized successfully the neo-Marxist theory of Poulantzas's "relative autonomy" of the state in the sense of exploiting state institutions and using them as a way of serving its interests and staying in power. Likewise, they say, Syriza's fixation on theories of the state which were established during the 70's within a different geopolitical context were put to play during 2015 and failed. Would you agree with such line of analysis?

**HS:** I wouldn't blame Poulantzas for either Pasok or Syriza. I think that the basic idea of seeing the state not as a static instrument of the ruling class but as an arena of contestation is a sound and potentially productive position. I think that the struggle for state power is crucial but needs to be part of a larger struggle in all the institutions of society.

**NA:** Do you think that Syriza underestimated realpolitik within the context of fragile globalized balance by collectively refusing to accept that the longing for resistance doesn't necessary translate into a readiness for resistance?

**HS:** I think they underestimated both the power and ruthlessness of the global forces ranged against them as well as the national readiness for resistance.

**NA:** How would a contemporary Marxian analysis explain Syriza's fixation on expressing a fiery manifesto against neoliberalism while believing that its repercussions can be negotiated with a realistic program that minimizes its costs?

**HS:** One thing that impressed me about Syriza (before July 2015) was that they understood that the defeat of neoliberalism would necessarily be a difficult and protracted process. I think that the left need to think carefully not only about what sort of society we want to create in the future, but how we get from here to there. We live within the repercussions of neoliberalism and need a realistic programme not only to minimise its costs but to move beyond it. Syriza wanted to do this, but they have gone off the rails. They have got lost in neoliberalism, while they still denounce it, although less and less credibly.

**NA:** Since social-democratic parties around Europe have failed to produce a correct political line and respond to neo-liberalism what is the future of the left? How can a more radical left have the capacity to translate political goals into policy that will bring prosperity?

**HS:** I think we have to win consent for a counter-narrative based on a plausible transition from capitalism to socialism. Even though I am a Marxist, I think that the role of Marxists at this juncture should be to become an effective force within broad left parties. I still think Syriza was right about that. For several years I was saying that we needed an Irish Syriza. Of course, I can't say that now. However, we do need a broad left party that will be what Syriza set out to be. Surrounding it we need a broad movement encompassing all sorts of alternative projects and networks. We need to build the new in the shell of old, but we also need to find a way to expropriate the expropriators, to take back what they have taken from us, which is very hard to do in complex capitalism. I still believe that capitalism is the problem and socialism is the solution. We need to come terms with the complexities and difficulties of that, to convince others of it and find a new path forward with it.