

Syriza in Power

Costas
Douzinas



'What a rare and wonderful book! Douzinas reflects with searing honesty on the challenges facing left parties trying to govern and protect embattled nations in an age of financialization and globalization. Because he is one of the most perspicacious critical legal and political theorists of our time, he has also offered a brilliant set of political theoretical meditations. By turns ironic, tragic, caustic and moving, *Syriza in Power* is essential reading for serious leftists everywhere.'

Wendy Brown, University of California, Berkeley

'While the Syriza government, elected in 2015 in Greece, was teaching the world a lesson of courage and fidelity, Costas Douzinas, its "professor elect", was teaching a lesson of lucidity, intelligence and imagination. Above all, he makes plain that, in the darkest hour, history is not finished, because the resistance is rooted in the life and ideals of the people itself. Whether one entirely agrees or not with Douzinas' "left Euroscepticism that can save Europe", his politics of truth will prove immensely helpful.'

Étienne Balibar, Kingston University

Amid the turmoil of economic crisis, Greece has become the first European experiment of left rule in a sea of neoliberalism. What happens when a government of the Left, committed to social justice and the reversal of austerity, is blackmailed into following policies it has fought against and strongly opposes? What can the experience of the Syriza government tell us about the prospects for the Left in the twenty-first century?

In this engaging and provocative book, Costas Douzinas uses his position as an 'accidental politician', unexpectedly propelled from academia into the world of Greek politics as a Syriza MP, to answer these urgent questions. He examines the challenges facing Syriza since its ascent to power in 2015 and draws out the theoretical and political lessons from one of the boldest and most difficult experiments in governing from the Left in an age of neoliberalism and austerity.

Costas Douzinas is Professor of Law at Birkbeck, University of London, and Founding Director of the Birkbeck Institute for the Humanities, as well as the Syriza member of the Hellenic parliament for Piraeus.

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Reflections of an Accidental Politician

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Syriza in Power

To Joanna
and
Phaedra

Prologue: The Accidental Politician

I was elected a Syriza Member of Parliament on 20 September 2015. I had not planned it, I did not want it, the idea had not even crossed my mind. I had lived in London since 1974. All my adult life and career had been spent in the protected and until recently gentle environment of British universities. In 1992, I had the great fortune to be appointed with Peter Goodrich to set up a Law School at Birkbeck College, the radical part of the University of London. Over twenty years, the School moved from three to thirty members of staff and acquired a reputation as the headquarters of Critical Legal Studies (CLS), a movement of radical academics and lawyers. The movement had started in the United States but has flourished in Britain. Its annual conference has been taking place every first weekend of September for some thirty years. On 5 September 2015, at the annual Critical Legal Conference at the University of Wroclaw, Poland my life changed. It was the first time the conference was taking place in Eastern Europe. I opened the conference offering a review of the history of CLS, its theoretical pluralism and the long campaign to export critical teaching, research and lawyering to other parts of the world.

It was a relaxing and pleasant occasion until Saturday morning. I was in my hotel room when a flurry of telephone calls from the Athens headquarters of Syriza turned my life

upside down. Alexis Tsipras, the Prime Minister who had resigned a few weeks earlier after losing his parliamentary majority, had announced new elections for the end of September. I was asked to stand. I refused. The calls kept coming. I offered to come to Athens and campaign for the party in its hour of need, even to have my name on the ballot paper in a non-electable position. Eventually, I was told that if I were placed on the list of my hometown Piraeus, I would considerably help the campaign but with a minimal chance of getting elected. After consulting Joanna and Phaedra, my partner in Australia and my daughter in Manchester, I nervously accepted.

The election campaign was short – just a couple of weeks. I toured central Piraeus with fellow candidates and party members. We visited public service and utilities offices, shops and markets. I was embarrassed and kept apologizing to fellow candidates and potential voters for my relative ignorance of local problems. The greatest fear, however, was appearing on TV. I was worried that my rusty Greek and lack of experience would work against the party. I was wrong. Everyone treated me with unexpected respect except for a notorious right-wing candidate, who attacked me on live TV for leaving London to stand for a loser party and a totalitarian ideology. I replied by telling her that she had paraphrased the inimitable Groucho Marx who defending an outrageous lie quipped ‘Are you going to believe your eyes or what I am telling you?’ I shared another TV debate with a former right-wing Secretary of Education. I spoke about the way European universities have turned into money-making degree-issuing assembly lines, about their extensive bureaucratization, about the abandonment of the humanities. I praised the Greek constitution, which, in a world first, makes higher education state-provided and free. The social democratic and right-wing parties (Pasok and New Democracy) have repeatedly tried to amend article 16 of the constitution which keeps universities public. The resistance of academics and students, however, condemned every attempt to failure. The private universities affair and education more generally are key battlegrounds for the government. After this rather didactic TV performance, I became ‘the professor’ and lost my TV fright. I was placed in the position of someone

who is supposed to know things that are crucial but generally unknown.

For Jacques Lacan this is the position of the analyst. The patient must assume that the analyst can interpret dreams and symptoms and can divine the deepest secrets of the psyche. The analyst's significance does not lie, however, in his ability to uncover the secrets of the analysant but in his position. He personifies knowledge, a guarantee that an answer to the psychic disturbance exists even if it is not forthcoming. Later, some people added the moniker 'philosopher' to that of 'the professor'. I knew immediately that the honeymoon period was coming to an end. Being called a philosopher is usually a term of mild ridicule. Professors are experts, philosophers are figures of unscrupulous obfuscation and unnecessary incomprehension. This ambiguous attitude, half admiring half dismissive, characterizes every part of life. Syriza cadres want me to speak in their constituencies but they will not vote for me in party elections. The academic *caché* brings people who would not otherwise come to a Syriza event. But as I was told early on, if I want to be elected to a party office or appointed to a ministry I should join a party faction or tendency. I have not done so, staying away from Syriza tribes. I remain an insider politically but an outsider organizationally, an apt metaphor for Syriza's wider position vis-à-vis the Greek state.

A couple of weeks after the opening of Parliament, I was elected Chair of the House Standing Committee on Defence and Foreign Relations. It is perhaps the most senior, although not the busiest committee. It scrutinizes bills from the two ministries and carries out, like the other five standing committees, a basic oversight of the executive. Part of my duty is to represent Parliament in various international and European conferences and meet a steady flow of ambassadors and visiting dignitaries. Speaking fluent English, the *lingua franca* of international politics, and letting it be known that I am a London Law professor does give an advantage. This is one of the few instances where my previous life and skills are of help. Otherwise my academic, research and publishing experience is largely irrelevant. I believed that I could help government and Parliament through a better use of my expertise. It was the wrong assumption. People who say that political and academic life cannot combine are right. What they mean is

that politics and academic skills are mostly incompatible. The two could cohabit only if they are kept strictly separate.

The ministers I have to work with and hold to account are the two most difficult members of the government. Panos Kammenos, the Minister of Defence, is the leader of the small right-wing Independent Greeks (AnEll) party, Syriza's coalition partner. He is a nationalist and cultural conservative with occasional bursts of emotional rhetoric. Nikos Kotzias, the Foreign Secretary, is a former Foreign Office official and an international relations expert. Kotzias has a good understanding of the arcane machinations of diplomacy and links with the post-Soviet world. He is the leader of a small 'left patriotic' group, which veers towards nationalism. Kotzias is authoritative and friendly outwards but secretive and controlling in his dealings. Having to work with these two highly experienced but unpredictable politicians is a challenging task. As many people tell me, my ticket drew the hardest lot among government ministers.

My involvement with foreign relations and defence taught me two things. First, the various European and international conferences to which MPs are invited regularly are less about business and more about self-esteem. Very little happens in the many inter-parliamentary conferences. This is in part the result of the global reduction in the significance of parliaments and the almost complete control of foreign relations by the executive and cliquish Foreign Office. An inverse relationship exists between the small significance of these conferences and the pomp and circumstance that accompanies them. People who have travelled overseas only for short holidays find themselves in exotic places in Latin America, Asia and Africa and are treated like minor royalty. Parliamentary tourism gives MPs a sense of importance, which is shared by the population at large. When my sophisticated brother met a number of MPs whom I had invited for drinks, he told me how surprised he was when he realized that they are 'normal' people. Appearing as someone of higher knowledge or greater power than the normal person is part of the deputy's mystique. In reality, both are in short supply.

The second lesson is related to academic work. Lawyers live by the text. They learn to speak, write and interpret in particular ways. As a legal philosopher, I wrote and practised

hermeneutics, rhetoric and semiotics. Deconstruction teaches that the meaning of texts continuously slides; hermeneutics, the importance of authorized communities of interpreters. I now moved to the other side as an occasional draughtsman of legal texts. The most important was a parliamentary resolution recognizing Palestine. It was drafted with the assistance of advisers and senior diplomats. We had to negotiate with the Palestinian and Israeli Embassies and all parties in Parliament to ensure the widest possible consensus. After three weeks of negotiations, in which every word and punctuation mark was pored over, we arrived at a final text acceptable to the opposition. The Speaker would read it in the Chamber on Friday 22 December 2015. I would then give the oration welcoming President Abbas, who was attending the session. While preparing the talk on the previous Sunday, I received a strange phone call from a senior opposition politician. I was asked whether the resolution referred to '*the* Palestinian state' or '*a* Palestinian state'. The text was embargoed until its reading later that week so I prevaricated. I soon realized that the concern was generalized. I spent the following three hours on the phone with assorted diplomats and politicians being lectured about the benefits or defects of the 'the'. Its inclusion in the text would make little difference to the resolution and would certainly have no effect whatsoever on the intractable Palestinian problem. People were prepared to argue, however, as if their lives depended on it. It was a mild instance of what we can call 'text fetishism': the belief that the text of the law determines the future and should aim to police strictly all possible interpretations and applications.

'You should forget about academic life and about writing books', a Syriza MP told me soon after I joined Parliament. Others repeated the warning and an academic friend and former MP confirmed it. 'Work in Parliament is all consuming', she said. 'You would not have time to do anything else. Forget about continuing your academic life.' I did not have a yardstick against which to judge the accuracy of the warnings, so I believed them and negotiated unpaid leave with the University of London. Luck intervened. By the time I had decided to stand in the elections, the teaching programme for the new academic year had already been set by the law

school. I was starting my Masters' degree class on the philosophy and history of human rights a week after the 20 September elections. It would have been impossible for the Law school to arrange an alternative lecturer. I was asked to help out and decided to continue with my teaching duties. For twelve weeks I commuted, spending a couple of days in central London and the rest of the week in Athens. I started the weekly commute with trepidation. By the end of the teaching term, I decided that continuing my academic activities was the only way to cope with the unplanned reversal of life. Going back to London, teaching, supervising doctoral students, reading and writing articles and books (including this one), meeting academic friends and sharing my experience kept me sane. Commuting weekly to teach for twelve weeks, rather than tiring me physically, relaxed and comforted me spiritually. Parliamentary life has minimal overlap with the life of the mind.

In the Chamber and the committee rooms, debates are often parallel monologues repeating the briefing 'non-papers' sent to MPs by the parties' spin-doctors. Deputies read their prepared speeches and rarely engage in the arguments of the previous speakers. Parliamentary rules, unlike those of the House or Commons, do not allow MPs to 'give way' to opponents while speaking. As a result, a genuine exchange of views seldom takes place. When senior ministers or opposition leaders speak, the Chamber is full; when ordinary members or Chryssi Avgi MPs take the floor, the Chamber empties. There is a strong impression that deputies make speeches in order to upload them later on YouTube and social media for the benefit of voters. I decided to speak only when I have something different and hopefully enlightening to say and only on topics about which I have some knowledge. Since I have many opportunities to speak publicly and publish in newspapers, websites and magazines, I decided not to create a Facebook page or a Twitter account. I told TV Channels that I was not prepared to participate in their political 'panels' which unfailingly end up in verbal and occasionally physical brawls. Sticking to the old, perhaps ancient, rituals of debate and communication means that I am not recognised in the street and will ensure that my life as a politician will probably be short.

Learning the rules, customs and etiquette of parliamentary life, following the set-piece debates and chairing committee meetings is often boring. Little intellectual effort is demanded, many hours are spent in the cafés waiting around for a leaders debate or for a vote on a government bill. Parliamentary café life is interesting. The smaller and unadorned cafeteria is frequented by Syriza MPs. It is a smoking den with a thick cloud of smoke engulfing the conversations. There is laughter, bonhomie and anxiety. Syriza members found themselves unexpectedly in Parliament, have little experience as politicians and treat the whole thing with a sense of historic responsibility and a dose of self-irony and deprecation. The larger and ‘posher’ lounge is a New Democracy lair. It is dominated by some sixty moustaches of all styles. Portraits of serious looking men ranging from revolutionary heroes to major politicians and former Speakers emphasize the gender division of politics. Respect for gender equality, minority identities and political correctness are not the strongest suits of my new environment. When I chide colleague for sexist language or the endless stories about ‘stupid blondes’ I am told that it is all a joke; don’t I understand, am I a politically correct killjoy?

This book is a sequel to *Philosophy and Resistance in the Crisis: Greece and the Future of Europe* published by Polity in 2013. In that book, written in 2012 at the height of the economic and political crises, I adopted ‘strategic optimism’: ‘Europe used Greece as a guinea pig to test the conditions for restructuring late capitalism in crisis’, I wrote. ‘What the European and Greek elites did not expect was for the guinea pig to occupy the lab, kick out the blind scientists and start a new experiment: its own transformation from an object to a political subject.’ My optimism was met with disbelief. I was repeatedly accused in Britain and Greece of taking leave of reality and turning wishes into facts. My predictions came true three years later, however. Syriza, the radical left party, won handsomely two elections and a referendum in 2015 and has undertaken the salvation of the country after six years of economic, political and moral devastation.

Personal vindication was followed by a major life transformation. As Syriza MP for my home city of Piraeus, I was

now a part of the Left, the unlikely arrival of which I had predicted. My wager had come through but I was caught in its after effects. On arriving in Parliament, I started taking notes about life as a politician. It was an alien environment; the early pages are full of incomprehension and excitement. I did not know the rules of the political game, how to speak on TV and debate in Parliament, how to chair Committee meetings. It was all terribly new, intriguing, even thrilling. This early note-taking was a mnemotechnic device: an aid to memory, somewhere to register the names of the tens and hundreds of new people I was meeting every day. Soon, however, the tone of the notes started changing. A great deal of what I was experiencing was no longer agreeable. Opposition deputies, initially polite, turned out to be narcissistic, impolite, almost brutish in their behaviour. The excitement of debate began to wear off when it became clear that very little exchange of views was taking place. The taking down of names, dates and events in order to remember gradually turned into a more organized journal. Sitting in the Chamber and following an uninteresting debate, I retreated to writing the journal in an attempt first to understand the scene around me and then to uncover the deeper meanings behind the often offensive words exchanged. It soon became clear that my professional deformation was turning me into an ethnographer of a strange and powerful tribe. I decided to turn my sketchy notes into a book. Writing a book about the politics of the Left, I became both the observer of strange situations and people and the object of observation as a member of the target group. The position of participant observer who is at the same time observed does not always lead to accurate self-reflection. The observer aims at an ethnographically accurate presentation of events, rituals, ways of life. The observer as observed aims at a phenomenologically accurate presentation of states of mind, intentionality and psychology. The two tasks overlap but also resist each other. I claim no objectivity or neutrality in the analysis of the events. These hugely overrated attributes are necessarily absent from the political arena. I hope, however, to give an accurate representation of events and a self-reflective impression of states of mind.

The events narrated in this book are based on personal experience, publicly available sources and only exceptionally

on private information. The book reveals no great secrets and discloses no confidences. It aims, however, to confront the many lies against Syriza the Greek establishment circulates in the West with little correction. My position as a deputy at the time of writing adds certain constraints. Party members and deputies (ought to) remain separate from the government; they have an important role in passing popular complaints to ministers, reminding them of left principles and holding them to account. However, the difficulty of running the state while under continuous attack makes us temper our critique and offer greater support to government than some actions deserve. I do not parade my ideological disagreements and conscience pangs as an excuse for my flawless voting record; nor do I apologize for sticking with government and party in its hour of need. I left the comforts of a pure conscience and the Pontius Pilate-like consolations of clean hands when I joined Parliament. I have no regrets or apologies. Angels and furies are my own private business at the midnight hour.

Over the last few years, I have been contributing articles and commentary in Britain, Greece and other parts of the world. In London, I have been writing for the *Guardian*, *Open Democracy* as well as various newspapers and websites. In Athens, I have been contributing since 2014 a fortnightly column entitled *Πολιτικά και Φιλοσοφικά Επίκαιρα* (Current Political and Philosophical) to the leading centre-left newspaper, the cooperative *Efimerida Syntakton* (Newspaper of Journalists). The *Efimerida Syntakton* is perhaps the one entrepreneurial success story of the crisis. Most electronic and print media lose money and operate to serve business interests and political campaigns. The *Efimerida Syntakton* is an exception. Writing regularly a 1,500-word article that puts forward some abstract idea in a comprehensive way is a difficult task. It is not a skill that can be mastered; one has to wrestle with it every time. Columns often start with a vignette or event in the news (the ‘political’ part) and then proceed to a theoretical generalization (the ‘philosophical’ part) that helps understand our predicament and hopes. Many ideas and chapters were rehearsed first in *Efimerida Syntakton* and other newspapers and websites. They have all been re-written with the generous and forgiving privilege of hindsight, to which a chapter of the book is devoted.

The book is divided into seven parts and twenty-one chapters. The first part (Resistance Rising) is a direct continuation and conclusion of the earlier book on the theory and practice of resistance. It charts debates in radical political philosophy and encounters with some of its leading thinkers. The final chapter ('A Philosophy of Resistance') offers an analytics of resistance that emerges out of recent experience and forms the basis of a separate book that will appear soon. The second part ('Syriza Agonistes') has the two longest chapters ('A Very European Coup' and 'Contradiction is the Name of the Governing Left'), which offer a critical description of the dense two years since Syriza's victory in January 2015. They do not offer a chronicle of events; they have the minimal presentation of facts necessary for the accompanying theoretical reflection. The protagonists of the dramatic events have spoken little so far in interviews and articles. I am sure that we will hear more in years to come. This most political part of the book describes briefly what happened in 2015 and 2016, offering a correction to the widespread inaccuracies about Greece and Syriza. It presents my reflections about the unprecedented victories of 2015, the July defeat and the prospects of the Left in the twenty-first century. The third part ('Reflections on Life as a Politician') is the most personal. Based on my journal, it mobilizes theoretical resources in order to make sense of the strange world I found myself in. It is a work of reflection and self-reflection even though the latter part will have to wait a quieter moment for its completion.

But what is the Left of the twenty-first century? There is no widely acceptable left theory and certainly no account of what left governmentality might be. This absence places added responsibility on Syriza as party and government. The inventors of the 'left interval' idea believe that Syriza's failure will put the left project back for a generation. This adds extra pressure and demands, I believe, to start the theoretical reconstruction before all relevant information is in or reflection and self-reflection have been concluded. The book starts this difficult task. Its writing in the midst of a state of emergency makes it refer elliptically only to existing theories without extensive exegesis. The theoretical forays assume some familiarity with its basic premises and often refer obliquely to my earlier work. The hope is that the theory on offer contributes