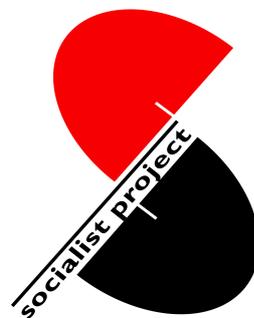


Greece in a Time of Madness and a Time of Badness

Sofiane Ait Chalalet and Chris Jones



Madness and badness are never far away in the world today. Greece provides many examples. The behaviour of the government forces many of us to wonder what drugs ministers are taking as they tell us that the future is looking brighter; that 2014 starts the beginning of the end to austerity; that the sacrifices of the people will be rewarded and so on. It is a joke in the worst possible taste as every single indicator – unemployment, suicide, health crises, bankruptcy, wages, and so on and so on continue to slide in the wrong direction. In any society with a sense of sanity, these ministers would be removed to the asylum.

There are so many symptoms of madness today. For example, Athens this Christmas has excelled itself in draping all the central squares with lights. Thousands of bulbs burning bright. Curtains of the things covering offices and departmental stores. Then there are the hundreds of tree trunks decorated with brightly coloured wool. Have the people responsible for all been living in Las Vegas?

Does all this glitter and light make us happy? Does it fill us with good cheer? You must be joking. Under the lights, nestled by the wool covered trees are people sleeping. Homeless, utterly destitute, impoverished. They are many in number. There is something especially shocking seeing homeless people huddled up sleeping next to the nativity stable scenes in some of the squares. And what about the 85% of the population for whom paying for their electricity is now a monumental worry; who shiver in their homes because they simply cannot afford both to eat and heat? What about the 300,000 homes without any electricity?



As one friend told us the contempt of those in power for the majority of the people is without measure. Seeing these lights is like pushing your face into a bowl of vomit. And guess who is paying for this theatre of lights and wool?

We walked these streets of central Athens with our friend Wasim. He has been living in a small room in the city centre since the middle of September waiting to find a way out of Greece. Thankfully it looks as though Sweden is going to give him asylum. He will then be able to leave this country where his family died at the end of July as they sought refuge from the hell of Syria. Wasim has travelled widely especially in the Gulf. But this is his first time in Europe. For the past 3 months he has walked the streets of Athens, the birthplace of western civilization and democracy. What, we wanted to know, was his impression?

Astonished shock, although even these words probably don't fully capture his impressions. Never, he said, has he seen such suffering out on the streets and under full public gaze. It was beyond anything he had experienced. And remember that Wasim is a Palestinian whose home was a refugee

camp in Syria. He has spent so many hours walking the streets that he could tell us something of the people who were rough sleeping. This one for 2 years, this one 6 months, this space was where there was a guy who has since died. Then there was his amazement at the public consumption of drugs. So many shooting up and snorting. It is happening everywhere he said and the police stand by and watch. 'Too many people destroyed' he told us: "Who is caring for them?"

This is central Athens 2014. Welcome to hell.

Badness

Rarely a day passes now when we don't get to read about the badness of those with power. Bank chiefs are arrested for money laundering; ex ministers are charged with soliciting bribes as are directors of hospitals, prisons, tax departments, construction companies, factories and the list is endless. Corruption is the system and not some small side-line committed by a few 'bad apples'.

For the people, the consequences of a thieving and lying ruling class are terrible and the more so the poorer and more vulnerable you are. Public services from health care to schools stumble from crisis to crisis. Front line workers and users struggle and suffer as resources evaporate before their eyes. Wages go unpaid for months in every sector of the economy. Indeed we now have the situation where not only are wages pushed ever lower but are increasingly accompanied by contracts that determine you will be paid in arrears of up to six months. Some companies are now openly advertising for volunteers with the incentive you might just be selected as the 'volunteer of the month' which is thought to be a wonderful addition to your CV. What book of jokes are they reading!

But as with the madness there is more than a touch of theatre to this ongoing exposure of badness. The mainstream media orchestrates a fanfare at the time of the arrests. Do they really think we, the people are going to be taken in by the idea that even the rich and powerful are going to be punished for their wickedness and betrayals? A few show trials followed by suspended prison sentences are never going to convince many now. It feels too much like the way in which the major corporations have always operated where one of the senior executives is prepared to carry the can for when the shit hits the fan.

Many in Greece are on a fast learning curve. You might be able to fool the people some of the time but this also a time is when new truths are being established. New truths include 'political leaders lie'; that 'to be rich is to be a thief'; that 'your democracy is a joke'; that 'governments hate the poor' and only represent the rich and the powerful. When they are confronted with these new truths they complain that we are all becoming cynical. Not to participate in their theatre by refusing to vote for example is dismissed as apathy. So be it. We know it for something different. Not apathy but anger, not cynicism but discovery.

Greece is Not Unique

There is a lot of nonsense written and talked about Greece and the Greeks. It comes from everywhere, even from those on the Left who should know better.

Of course as with any society we have our peculiarities. These are mainly defined by history and certainly not by some innate characteristic of Greekness or whatever. We need to know this history, *our history* as told by the people and not by the powerful. Let us not forget the words of Howard Zinn the American activist and writer who said:

“History is important. If you don't know your history, it is as if you were born yesterday, anybody up there in a position of power can tell you anything and you have no way of checking up on it.”

Next, people want truth and understanding. We are sick of the lies and propaganda of the powerful who like nothing better than to blame us for our misery.

In struggling for truth let us start by not seeing Greece as some unique spectacle of tragedy and crisis. For some here the plunge into poverty has been traumatic. But the majority of Greeks were poor long before the crisis hit. Deep poverty with little prospect of change has been commonplace for the majority of the human race for centuries and more. 80% of the world's population 'survives' on less than \$10 a day, and millions more on even less. To be treated like shit, is commonplace for most of humanity. To be abused and persecuted by the police is a universal experience of the global poor. So is to die before your time; to know hunger; to be denied dignity. The bonds of misery transcend nationality, 'race', gender, place and time.

There can never be a Greek solution to the current calamity here not unless we somehow unhitch ourselves from the world and drift out into space. We live in a world where the rich and powerful are taking everything from those who have the least. In Greece, the lying and thieving rulers are pushing for a solution which actually sustains this wickedness. They don't give a shit for the majority, whom they hate and despise. It is not their Greekness which defines this behaviour. This is the morality of the rich which binds together the powerful across the world. Their cruelties have no boundaries. They are without humanity.

So let us put an end to the 'poor old Greece' crap. Let's stop talking about the unprecedented crisis facing Greece. This takes us nowhere useful. There are plenty of precedents. It insults and degrades the billions who have been in this same place for much longer; it sustains an unsavoury western superiority which has been largely based on giving world that greatest of weapons of mass destruction – capitalism and its side kick imperialism.

As you can see we are angry but we are not despairing. Scales are falling from the eyes of many.

Our job is not to warn the political elites of the consequences of their madness and badness. On any reasonable understanding of human history we are once more witnessing the decline of those who think they and their families will endure for ever. We certainly can not sit back and wait for their inevitable decline. For a start they are too nasty and too well armed to go quietly. Their answer to their disconnectedness from the majority is to wall themselves in as they make the rest of the globe like some massive prison. Surveillance once restricted to the prison yard is now everywhere. Governments which fear their people are highly dangerous.

To sit back and wait for their decline can be no option.

Getting angry by detailing and documenting the lies and inhumanity of the powerful is part of this process. Anger directed outwards and not on to ourselves and fellow strugglers is very important but also not enough.

As the powder keg builds and heats we need to be talking far more with each other about the world we want to create. Humanity, dignity, kindness, solidarity recur again and again on the streets from east to west, north to south. These are the roads to travel. We need to get moving. •