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## Breaking the Myths of Power: The Struggles of the Haitians, Algerians, and Greeks

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by **Koenraad Bogaert**

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What do the struggles of the Greek people have in common with those of the Haitian slaves at the end of the eighteenth century or those of the Algerians in the middle of the twentieth century? Of course, these struggles are incomparable in many ways, but there is one important parallel that can be drawn. Both moments of anticolonial resistance compelled ruling power to show its true face and managed to shatter the myths informing that power's universal claims and its so-called humane intentions. The Greek people are now doing the same thing with the myth of the "European Compromise." The clear-cut rejection of European austerity policies in the recent referendum is yet another stage in the process in which the Greek resistance opens the eyes of the world, and brings the people of Europe face to face with what they are really up against.



["OXI" demonstration, Syntagma square, Athens, 3 July 2015. Image via Wikimedia Commons]

Throughout history, resistance has been one of the main drivers of societal change. Today will be no different. The great revolutions (1688, 1776, 1789, and 1917), the struggles of organized labor in the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth centuries, the anti-slavery campaign, the anticolonial wars, the anti-apartheid movement—in each of these cases, the struggles of ordinary people against an oppressive power managed to change the course of history in fundamental and hopeful ways. It is true, the eventual outcome of those struggles did not always reflect the aspirations of those who fought in the first place. To the contrary, new repressors often replaced old ones. Yet still, all these forms of resistance have left their indelible mark on social history. The crucial role of resistance, from this point of view, concerns not only the effective overthrow of a feudal, colonial, or racist regime in one particular place. Equally important was the exposure of the legitimating myth of ruling power, obliging the powerful to reveal the violence that underlies the maintenance of a given political order on a much broader scale. In other words, in the past, revolts have played a crucial role in exposing a structural inequality and social injustice that used to be regarded as natural, and in revealing the true nature of an oppressive power that used to present itself as benevolent.

A few weeks ago, on 24 June 2015, I attended a lecture by former president of the European Council Herman Van Rompuy at the Handelsbeurs in Ghent (Belgium). Van Rompuy, who came to talk about why Africa needed Europe, presented the European Union as "an island of peace in the midst of seas of war" (referring to the violence of Islamic State in the Middle East and North African region). The EU, according to him, was the result of a "democratic

compromise" between the twenty-eight member states, and that compromise needed to be defended at all costs, if necessary even "with coercion" (this time referring to Greece). Yet with each new phase in the unfolding Greek tragedy, it is becoming clearer and clearer that this so-called "compromise," lauded by so many prominent leaders in Europe who seize every opportunity to represent it as beneficial to all European citizens, *has* to be respected at all times, *even if* it means the destruction of a whole society, notably the Greek one. The Greek resistance exposes the myth of the European compromise, and brings us face to face with the true nature of the authoritarian project of the European Union. From this point of view some parallels can be drawn between the struggles of the Greek people and those of the Haitian slaves, or the Algerian independence movement.

The Haitian Revolution, the first and only successful slave revolt in modern history, erupted in August 1791. Respectively the French, the British, and then the French again were defeated in a guerrilla war under the command of the charismatic leader Toussaint L'Ouverture, an ex-slave himself (this, of course, with the helpful hand of the **yellow fever mosquito**). More than a decade of struggle led eventually to the foundation of the republic of Haiti in 1804. Toussaint L'Ouverture, in the meantime, had died in a French prison. The events had shocked Europe and its political and commercial elite. As such, the great accomplishment of the revolution was not only the fact that the Haitians succeeded in ousting the two most powerful European Empires, but also that they violently exposed the European myths of liberty, equality, and fraternity. Slavoj Žižek illustrates this "shock" in his book *First as Tragedy, then as Farce* by describing a specific scene on the battlefield where, at a certain moment, the army of Napoleon approaches the Haitian army of (self-)liberated slaves. At first, the French soldiers thought the enemy was singing some kind of tribal war chant, but the closer they arrived, it became clear that the Haitians were actually singing the *Marseillaise*. This scene, in which an important referent of "European civilization" was used *against* the Europeans, exposed the true contradictions embedded within European modernity. As Žižek puts it:

[T]he message of the Haitian soldiers' *Marseillaise* was not "You see, even we, the primitive blacks, are able to assimilate ourselves to your high culture and politics, to imitate it as a model!" but a much more precise one: "in this battle, we are more French than you, the Frenchmen, are—we stand for the innermost consequences of your revolutionary ideology, the very consequences you were not able to assume." [1]

The struggle of the Haitians showed the world (or at least the bourgeois reading public) that the ideals of the Enlightenment and the French Revolution did not only give form to the industrial revolution, liberal democracy, and Western modernity, but also to colonialism and the industrial slave-system of the Caribbean plantations. Slavery as an institution did not persist *despite* the Enlightenment. To the contrary, it reached new heights *during* the rise of liberalism and the hegemony of the European bourgeoisie. The total slave population was approximately 330,000 in 1700, almost three million in 1800, and only fifty years later, this number further doubled to six million. [2] The slave trade back then was dominated by the British Empire, also the center of liberalism with prominent figures such as **John Locke** and **John Stuart Mill**. This apparent contradiction cannot only be explained by the spirit of the age. After all, the bourgeoisie *as a class* thrived to a considerable extent on its colonial adventures and the exploitation of slaves.

It was thanks to the resistance of, amongst others, the slaves of Haiti that the contradictions within liberal thought were violently exposed to the so-called "modern" world. It is striking, for example, that the Haitian Revolution was the only revolution in the middle of an age of revolutions that led to a constitution that explicitly abolished slavery and prohibited discrimination based on race and color of skin. Neither the American nor the French revolutions accomplished this. The fact we cannot underestimate the impact of the Haitian Revolution is also revealed by the European powers' reaction against the young nation of ex-slaves. They feared a risk of contagion, and decided to boycott the new republic. Moreover, the French demanded heavy reparations in exchange for official recognition. Some historians still see in these facts one of the reasons why Haiti today is one of the poorest nations in the world.

The other example I want to refer to is the Algerian War of Independence. Between 1954 and 1962, one of the bloodiest struggles of decolonization took place. More than a million people died in the process. It also became a trauma for the French occupier as it led to the fall of the Fourth Republic; it almost produced a civil war in France when French army officers organized a putsch in Algiers, and the underground colon organization **OAS** intensified its terrorist campaign. Despite, or maybe because of, the horrors of the war, the Algerian struggle for independence achieved much more than just the ousting of the French. Just as in the case of the Haitian Revolution, the war violently exposed the European colonial myth, and its so-called *mission civilisatrice*. One of the icons of the anticolonial struggle was the pan-African philosopher and psychiatrist Frantz Fanon. Fanon, actually born in the Caribbean island of Martinique, became active in the Algerian struggle of independence after his studies in France. He forcefully addressed the inner contradictions of Western civilization, criticizing "this Europe which never stops talking of man yet massacres him at every one of its street corners, at every corner of the world." [3] To Fanon, the European defenders of universal values had reduced reality to hollow words.

In his famous text, *The Wretched of the Earth*, he not only called upon Algerians but upon all colonized people to free themselves radically, and to do so with violence against the colonial oppressor who used physical, structural, and psychological violence to totally dominate and dehumanize the colonized. The bloody violence of the war, and the

intellectual role of thinkers such as Fanon, contributed in sparking international solidarity and a critical political awareness, not only amongst the colonized peoples but gradually also within European and French public opinion. The latter were confronted more and more with the traumatic stories of returning soldiers, and with the condemnations of public figures such as Jean-Paul Sartre. Moreover, as in the Haitian case, Fanon's critique did not reject the values propagated by European modernity. To the contrary, Fanon was one of the first to express a **radically cosmopolitan critique**, which wanted to transcend Western-centric thought. He stood for the innermost consequences of so-called universal values, the very consequences the European colonial elite were not able to assume.

From this particular point of view, the Greeks, today, are involved in a struggle that has potentially very similar effects as the ones of the Haitians and the Algerians. The recent years of resistance, with Syriza as its electoral outcome, might be considered—metaphorically speaking—as an anticolonial struggle *in* Europe against the Troika's seizure of power. This metaphor is not too far-fetched, actually, if one remembers Europe's recent past in relation to North Africa. From the last quarter of the nineteenth century onwards, Europe colonized the autonomous provinces of the Ottoman Empire through foreign debt. Cash-strapped North African governments borrowed from European banks at excessive rates and spent far beyond their means in order to finance their modernization policies. When those governments eventually defaulted, the European governments stepped in to bail out their banks. Bankruptcy in North Africa opened the door for more direct forms of European control, first via "international" (read European) debt commissions that obtained partial or even complete control over local budgets, and later via the effective takeover of local government (the so-called Protectorates).[4] Ironically, Greece at that time was subject to a **similar financial regime**.

Today, individual EU-member states like Greece are being compelled to implement drastic austerity measures and structural reforms in order to remedy, in the first place, a **banking crisis**. More precisely, in the case of Greece, it concerns the bail out of **German and French banks**. In contrast to the contemporary myth of the European Union (that is, a democratic transfer of authority from the national to the European scale), the European elite is orchestrating a seizure of power from within the institutions, mainly in the interests of **the powerful financial sector**. Democracy and national sovereignty are subordinated to the governing law of the Memorandum. And, in the process, those elites seem to use the banking crisis as an opportunity to further transform the Eurozone into **"a neoliberal utopia of cheap labor, flexible labor conditions, and docile citizens."**

As the Greek case testifies, this European project becomes ever more aggressive when confronted with opposition. Since Syriza came to power, the stakes have been pushed to the next level. The European Central Bank (ECB) openly removed its mask as a politically neutral institution, and showed its true face in this crisis by creating a liquidity shortage for the Greek banks. Already from the very beginning of Syriza's rise to power, the ECB partially cut off the funds of the Greek banks by making them rely on **"emergency liquidity assistance"** (ELA). Yet this blackmail by the ECB was not new. It has previously threatened to cut off emergency credit lines in **Ireland, Greece, Spain, and Italy**. Only now, ironically thanks to the Greek resistance, it has to publicly justify its political interventions, a very uneasy position to be in for a central bank.

With the confrontation between Syriza and the Troika reaching new heights due to the referendum and its clear rejection of the austerity policies, a "Grexit" seems even more probable than before. But again, this shows the true nature of the so-called "European compromise." A "Grexit" today does not have the same implications as one five years ago, at the start of the so-called sovereign debt crisis. The damage has been done and, most importantly, the private banks have been saved, since **national governments, the ECB**, and the IMF have taken on most of the private debt. Additionally, at this moment a "Grexit" seems much more favorable to European elites than to submit to some of Syriza's demands or counter-proposals. In an interview with the Belgian financial newspaper *De Tijd* on 7 February 2015, the Belgian minister of finance gave the following answer to the question of whether the Eurozone can handle a "Grexit": "According to me, the Eurozone would suffer much more damage in the long run when it submits to the Greek government. Because then there is a real risk of contagion. If the Greeks receive concessions, why not the Spanish, the Portuguese, and the Irish?" Spain particularly, the fourth largest economy of the Eurozone, is a real political concern. A possible victory by Podemos could have far-reaching consequences, perhaps much more than in Greece, and that is why the **"[European] elites are determined to end the revolt against austerity in Greece."**

In this unequal battle between David and Goliath, the most important aspect is arguably not that Syriza would succeed in gaining some concessions from the Eurocrats, but rather that its struggle and perseverance expose the *true political nature* of the current European project to more and more citizens. The outbreak of the financial crisis, both in Europe and the rest of the world, has already opened the door for many counter-hegemonic analyses and conclusions to enter the mainstream. The Greek struggle might push this to a whole new level. The vicious debates in the mainstream media and the outspoken attacks on the Troika's *political intentions* by renowned scholars and public intellectuals such as **Joseph Stiglitz, Paul Krugman, and Thomas Piketty** testify to the importance of the Greek struggle, and its role in breaking the myths promoted by Europe's ruling power. One can only hope that the example of the Greeks opens the eyes of more and more European citizens, activists, and public intellectuals, and finally, that it becomes the catalyst for a growing, and more united, resistance across the continent.

The Greek OXI (NO) against austerity might be the next stage in changing the European political landscape. European leaders seemed quite dumbfounded when the first results came in. It was almost as if they had not seen it coming, and as if they had put too much trust in the **aggressive campaign** of the Yes-camp to install enough fear in the Greek minds. In the immediate aftermath of the referendum, they had to lower their voices, like for example Martin Schultz, the President of the European Parliament, who changed his tune from an open call to **"regime change"** to one of respect for the Greek vote, albeit adding immediately that there is still **very little room for renegotiation**. Still, the referendum confronts the European elite with a **major dilemma**: do they respect and take into account the democratic decision of the Greek people, or do they still give priority to the interests and demands of the banks, the financiers, and corporate Europe? Whatever the outcome, the damage has been done. As **Stathis Kouvelakis**, a member of the central committee of Syriza, puts it: "Even if the European Union manages to defeat the Greeks' resistance, it will, I believe, pay a very heavy price for its attitude. Greece is just the most advanced point of the European crisis: the EU's project has less and less support among public opinion across the continent."

Like the Haitian slaves who sang the *Marseillaise*, or the radical cosmopolitan critique of Frantz Fanon, the Greek resistance does not contradict the utopian project of the European Union, but rather stands for the innermost consequences of European unification, the very consequences the European elite are not willing to assume. The rigidity of the European elite in this Greek tragedy cannot be explained by mere ideological differences—especially since economists on both sides of the right-left spectrum are calling European policies towards Greece ineffective and completely unsustainable. It can only be explained by referring to the class nature of the European project, and the current campaign against any alternative European political force or project. So it is not a question of just **"convincing"** the Eurocrats that they are wrong; it is a question of defeating them. The importance of the Greek resistance by far exceeds its own national boundaries. Whether this struggle will eventually end up like the Haitian Revolution (with a boycott and complete isolation), or like the Algerian War of Independence (as part of an international movement against oppression), will largely depend on the level of mobilization in the rest of the Eurozone, and the ability of different social movements in Europe to unite behind the Greek example. To borrow Fanon's words, let us leave this Europe, which never stops talking of the European citizen and European solidarity yet pushes that very same citizen more and more into debt, poverty, and despair.

## NOTES

[1] Slavoj Žižek, *First as Tragedy, then as Farce*, (London: Verso, 2009), 112.

[2] Domenico Losurdo, *Liberalism. A Counter-History*, (London: Verso, 2011), 35.

[3] Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, (New York: Grove Press, 2004 [1963]), 235.

[4] Eugene Rogan, *The Arabs. A History*, (New York: Basic books, 2009), 109-146.

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