

Boaventura de Sousa Santos
May 28, 2015

In Solidarity with Greece

I am writing from Athens, where I came at the invitation of the Nicos Poulantzas Institute to discuss the issues and challenges that now beset the countries of Southern Europe and the potential lessons to be drawn from the innovative experiments currently being conducted in Europe and elsewhere in the world. From the discussion there was general agreement to the effect that whatever happens over the next few days or weeks in Greece's negotiations with the European institutions and the IMF will be decisive not only for the Greek people but also for the peoples of Southern Europe and for Europe as a whole.

What is at stake here is the defense of decency and of the minimal well-being of a people that has been the victim not only of tremendous historical injustice but also of austerity policies (poorly calibrated to boot) that spread death and social devastation (made fully apparent in the streets and housefronts) without even reaching any of the goals that were supposed to legitimize them. No wonder the first item in Syriza's Thessaloniki program is to immediately alleviate the harshness of the current humanitarian crisis. Imbued with a militant passion long absent from Europe's dull politicians, Theano Fotiou, the deputy minister for social solidarity, explains to me how the rescue of those who have been pushed into extreme poverty is being organized (with food programs, free electricity and free medical treatment), while highlighting the somewhat surprising cooperation of Greek banks in terms of managing the payment system. Aside from the emergency measures, Syriza's program, just like that of Podemos in Spain, reads as a moderate, social-democratic agenda. This is Europe's great irony: yesterday's Social Democrats are today's liberals;

yesterday's revolutionaries are today's Social Democrats. The main red lines Syriza can not allow to be crossed have to do with pension reduction and the end of collective bargaining, the two central pillars of European social democracy. In defending them, Syriza is standing up for the most precious achievements in Europe's political, social and cultural legacy of the past half century. It is a brave defense indeed, in what is the most asymmetric and lopsided negotiation process in recent European (and perhaps world) history. And it shall not be a solitary defense as long as it can count on the active solidarity of every European citizen who does not see the quagmire of resignation as an option.

So what's next? I often say that sociologists are good at predicting the past. But the available signs seem to give us more reasons for pessimism than optimism. Surprisingly, one of those disturbing signals with regard to the Greek people is the economic program recently made public by Portugal's Socialist Party. The conservative radicalness of some of its proposals, especially as far as labor relations and pensions are concerned (with measures whose conservatism surpasses those of the Spanish Socialist Party and actually resembles those of Ciudadanos, Spain's new Conservative Party), makes one think that it was drafted with inside knowledge, that is, using prior, privileged knowledge of the as yet secret decisions Europe's "major decision makers" have already made in relation to Greece and Southern European countries. With regard both to pensions (with the undermining of sustainability conditions so as to justify further reductions) and to labor relations (with the fatal undermining of collective bargaining), the Socialist Party's proposed policies violate Syriza's two main red lines. In fact, if put into practice in Portugal, such policies will do away with the mitigated version of social democracy we managed to build over the last forty years. Could this be a forewarning that Syriza is about to be butchered to serve as a vaccine against what might occur in Spain, Ireland, Portugal and even Italy? We do not know, but it is only legitimate to raise a suspicion and to hold one certainty. The suspicion is that the "major decision

makers” intend to strike at Syriza’s heart, causing many of its supporters (especially those not dependent on humanitarian assistance) to abandon it, possibly with the sly promise that they stand to profit more from Europe without Syriza than with it. The certainty is that, with Syriza’s defeat, the socialist parties that once opted for a third way will soon find out that such path is truly a dead end.