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Greece's Communist Organization: Learning to Swim in Stormy Weather

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We in Kasama, and many others, have been engaged for several years now in trying to imagine new ways to fuse revolutionary ideas with the popular discontent of the people. It is part of what drew our [Winter's End](#) reporting team to Greece and what draws us now to discuss the [Communist Organization of Greece](#) (known as the KOE, and pronounced 'Koy').

All around the rim of the Mediterranean Sea there has been an eruption of massive anti-government movements. Many people in the U.S. know about the “Arab Spring” that swept North Africa – starting in Tunisia, then Egypt, and Libya – and erupting in nearby Yemen and Syria. Meanwhile, similar mass movements also filled the city squares on the European, northern side of the Mediterranean – though these movements in Greece and Spain have been much less well known than eruptions on the southern, North African side.

Among the common features of these “movements of the squares” is that they have drawn large numbers of youth into political life – often with a sweeping sense of rejecting previous politics (both existing governments and the oppositional parties). There is a sense that everything “before” is corrupt, complicit and exhausted, and everything “after” must now make a break. And while there are obviously deep concerns and frustrations that drew people into the squares, it also stands out that the politics of these eruptions were extremely unformed: People have had only a vague sense of what they wanted to put in the place of current politics.



Great and energetic hopes often masked underlying naiveté and fracture lines that would inevitably come to the fore: how should these popular movements view the existing army (in Egypt), or the intrusive Western powers (in Libya), or problems of defining specific solutions, or the organizational problems of creating political instruments?

A Legacy with Real Strength and Real Baggage

In Greece, much more so than in North Africa, the country’s politics have a strong, historic and diverse set of communist currents. And so the question was sharply posed from the beginning: How will the various parties of that older left engage Greek’s new popular movement of the squares? What will they propose? How will they present themselves? Will they allow themselves to be transformed?

Obviously, our own primitive communist projects in the U.S. have a great deal to learn from such experiences. We too hope to create new politics in the context of great eruptions, and we hope to approach such movements with some clarity of purpose and creativity of method.

Glory Days and the Fading of Political Tradition

One starting point for this political story is the understanding that a high point of Greek’s radical history was the bitter civil war after World War 2 (1946-49). The old Communist Party led an armed attempt to pull Greece onto the socialist road, and Anglo-American imperialists pushed for a quite fascist and capitalist Greece. The communists ultimately lost – and suffered mass executions, torture and dispersal into exile.

And, as is often true after such “glory days,” a great deal of the subsequent radical politics within Greece emerged in the shadow of (and under the influence of) the Communist politics of 1946 – its assumptions, its models, its worldview, and its strategies. A particular moment of politics was often frozen as a tradition, and the surviving underground movements often developed into keepers of that old flame.



This history has had two results:

First, there has been a real and genuinely popular communist current within Greek life, and when people longed for radical change they often reached for communist politics to express their desires.

Second, those communist politics have often been rather rigid, uncreative and fixed – defined by the political world and world view of a rather distant (and flawed) communist past.

So it was inevitable that major leaps in the world would shake, not just Greece itself, but the world of communist politics. This happened in the 1960s – when the international communist movement split and radical new experiments were tried in Maoist China. And now it has happened again, as a new generation has sprung on the stage in this movement of squares.



Starting in May of 2011, thousands of youth took over Syntagma Square in the heart of Athens, and launched a still-continuing protest of encampments and rallies that demand “real democracy.” Their target has been the austerity imposed on Greece by the international banks and European Union, and much of their fury is directed at an existing political establishment that has rolled over to crippling demands

made by finance capital. Their movement spread to other cities and towns in Greece, and built in intensity as the police repeatedly attempted to drive them from the squares. Meanwhile, far-right nationalist and fascist forces attempted to infiltrate the squares and transform them into reactionary movements.

This new political eruption represented something very disorienting for leftwing Greek politics – and part of it was that (for the first time) this generation did not have the same inclination to look backwards to the Greek Civil War and subsequent “traditions” for their

words and demands. They have chosen to emphasize their own novelty, and to dare to be raw and even consciously undefined.

In this situation, a great deal of the old left in Greece has responded with a bewilderment that went over to hostility or indifference. Some are deeply entrenched in the tired and over-choreographed dance of Greek parliamentary politics. Such electoral hacks are often being simply dismissed in Syntagma Square as part of the old ways. Others are entrenched (in a different way) in subcultural anarchist communities that have become ritualized, self-contained and somewhat cut off.

The older left forces have many criticisms for the mass movement. They say it is de-politicized, not radical enough, and bourgeois democratic. And while a number of those criticisms have merit (or at least touch on real things), these problems of the upsurge are sometimes used to justify an aloofness, or (worse) a clinging to old parliamentary ways (at a time when something new is emerging (precisely “at a distance” from old, clogged, oppressive political channels).

Most of the left chose to stay out of Syntagma Square and to preach at it from the outside.

By contrast, the KOE, a Maoist current within Greece, chose to plunge into this movement of the squares – and try to find a way in these unknown waters.

The KOE Dives in

“Learn to swim in stormy weather and high waves.” -Mao Zedong

The events in Syntagma Square have re-shaped a great deal of the political terrain in Greece. There has been an eruption of re-alignments and debates over the direction forward. It has the feel of a very new opportunity in Greece’s revolutionary movement.

As this new mass protest movement erupted in May 2011 and grew, the KOE decided to seize the moment. They suspended their previous focus (which had one major component of conducting revolutionary agitation in the electoral arena) and adopted new tactics during the last few months.

They suddenly shifted their cadre from other places, such as the Coalition of the Radical Left ([SYRIZA](#)), a mainly parliamentary leftist coalition. Instead, they centered their work in the squares, and have begun working to give the movement of the squares some strategic coherence. They have worked to unite the squares of each city into a common organization and to raise new demands (such as the expulsion of the EU and IMF from Greece, and the overthrow of the present government).



Entering untested waters in this way immediately injects all kinds of strains and exhilaration into a political organization – and the KOE is finding itself transformed, even as it seeks to transform the mass movement. And it is also worth noting that the KOE had planned to begin an indefinite occupation of Syntagma Square in September, but had been outstripped by the initiative of the Greek youth, a development it has gladly embraced.

In the Syntagma Square, during the first days of this movement, the gathering protesters formed themselves into a “people’s assembly” and from those earliest days established rules for their functioning and public presentation. Among the decisions was an agreement not allow the old political forces to present themselves within the movement or speak for the movement. And the decision took the form of a rule forbidding all political parties from displaying their banners, slogans or newspapers in the Square.

This was, as you can imagine, a very controversial point. And the KOE was one of the few left organizations that chose to abide by those rules, and agree (temporarily and under protest) to hold back agitation and recruitment under its own name. The KOE is associated with a number of broader organizations of struggle, and those organizations have been allowed to speak under their own names – and the revolutionary politics of the KOE has had a public presence through the channels and voice of those mass organizations.

A great deal of debate erupted within the Greek left over precisely this prohibition. The KOE has called on the Left to enter the Square, and to break with old modes of existence. Many other trends have called for new parliamentary elections, while the KOE by contrast has argued that a break is now needed with Parliament, and that the time has come for a revolution from the Square.

To be clear, such a revolution (in their current conception) would not be immediately socialist in form, and, in fact, socialism has not been a widespread demand among the people in Syntagma Square. But this revolution would, in the KOE’s view, expel the International Monetary Fund and the European Union, and move towards forming some sort of new “People’s Democracy, with a leader something like Chavez for a period of time.”

This view has been very controversial to many leftists and a section of the anarchists who have boycotted the Square. Some argue that launching a revolution under those terms would not go far enough in its revolutionary program. Others think that any revolution at this point is unrealistic, and that things should go to Parliament so that the PASOK (Greece’s ruling social-democratic party) can be driven out of power.

Even within SYRIZA, an electoral coalition which the KOE participates in, only 3 of the groups have chosen to enter Syntagma Square, while most others still argue for a parliamentary road. The KOE on the other hand has focused on the square, demanding the expulsion of the IMF and the EU, and the ousting of the Greek government.

Preparation for the Unexpected

How does a communist organization prepare itself for such moments? Why did the KOE dare to take a creative risk while others pulled back into their pre-existing parliamentary schema?

To understand these recent developments, however, we should first step back and trace the history of KOE's development and understand its trajectory, and also the story of the Greek communist movement.

During the 1980's, Greece's first Maoist party abruptly dissolved. This party was called the Communist Party of Greece (Marxist-Leninist), or KKE-ML. The KKE-ML confronted two problems that ate it alive.

The Cultural Revolution and the anti-revisionism of China had been central to the KKE-ML's development, and demoralization from the mid-70s capitalist counter-revolution in China simply shattered them.

A great wave of illusions had set in among people. A new party of social-democrats, the PASOK, had risen to power. Revolutionaries everywhere were being told that the PASOK was where the people were at, that PASOK was "secretly radical," and they should dissolve into the PASOK or practice entryism to change PASOK from within (in other words the "inside outside strategies" we hear about in the U.S.) The PASOK absorbed much of the pre-existing left, bringing some leftists into positions of mini-authority and institutionalization, with communist and revolutionary politics abruptly silenced.

In the KKE-ML's story, 80% of its members suddenly dropped out of political life. A small group, today's KKE-ML, reconstituted itself as the original party. An even smaller group constituted itself as A/synechia (meaning "Continuity" in Greek). Basing itself on Maoism, A/synechia argued that the previous lines inherited from the 1960's were inadequate, so it constituted itself as a communist study group to identify new strategies and methods.

For the next 20 years, A/synechia slowly grew, until in 2003 it had a sudden burst of growth and became the Communist Organization of Greece (KOE). A/synechia and now KOE had tried to refound themselves on a new basis with "disciplined practice and free-roaming minds." On the one hand, their period as A/synechia led them to explore the ideas of people such as Benjamin Coriat (a political economist who wrote on technology and changes in society), Oliver Pastre (a political economist who explored changes in finance capital in the 21st century), and Alain Badiou (a popular communist philosopher coming out of Maoism who has arguing for resurrection of "the Communist Idea" in the 21st century in very new ways). They built solidarity with the revolution in Nepal, studied the creative revolutionary communism being developed there, and sent three major delegations of people to Nepal.

They have also chosen to adopt a humility that is relatively uncommon among Leninists. For example, they believed it would be wrong to pretend to be "the vanguard" while in reality they were a small group trying to work towards re-constituting a communist movement, and working with many forces outside of their organization. And they also believed that the marker "party" has to really mean something.

They originally called themselves "a group," and now constituted themselves as "an organization," even though today they have developed an apparatus in dozens of cities, and are larger than all the parties that exist among leftists in the United States.

They also, during this period, developed a critique of the directionless activism that had existed in the Maoist movement before them. They argued that a deep summation of the past century of the communist movement was necessary, and that the problems of the international communist movement need to be accounted for:

“What prevailed was the logic of ‘heavy activism’ and ‘making noise’ without taking care about the political and ideological lines of the movement, that is to say the programmatic elements that needed to be redefined in a period of big changes and realignments in the whole world. Instead of a heavy and cumbersome organizational form with very insufficient content of internal discussion, what was necessary was a political operation that would arm the whole organization for the particular needs of an ideological, political and organizational strengthening. At the same time, measures should be taken against the creation of ‘independent kingdoms’ inside the organization in several Greek cities, against the strangling of the desire for study and research, against dogmatism and blind self-confidence, against the cultivation of several ‘mythologies’....”

“Capitalist restoration has set a series of issues – if we want to really face them, it is not enough to just speak of a betrayal that took place. We need scientific answers and convincing arguments. We need the self-criticism of the communist movement; and we need a deep cleansing process from a series of revisionist theories and practice-rituals, that have nothing to do with the reality and the needs of the peoples.”

Their larger critique has been made available here: [The influence of the Chinese revolution on the Greek communists.](#)

These decades were a period of preparation, in which relative quiet gave way to a period of great upsurges over the last few years. And the KOE, because of its choices and its particular form of Maoist politics, had situated itself to enter those explosive new movements with the ability to think and the ability to fight.

2008: Greece Explodes

If we step forward to the December 6, 2008, Alexandros Grigoropoulos, a 15 year old from Exarchia, was shot and murdered by the police. Exarchia, a base of anarchism in Greece, erupted in riots. Students walked out of their campuses throughout Athens, and Syntagma Square was on fire. For weeks the rebellions continued and shook the Greek society to its core.

These events shook the Greek left, and led to a great deal of re-alignment among radicals. Most notably, the largest communist party (in name only), the KKE, came out opposing the rebellions. The KKE argued:

“The genuine popular revolt will not smash even a single glass. Exactly because it aims at transforming into public property whatever the working people created in this country, it does not want to destroy this property. Why should a revolt destroy business establishments? Why should a revolt burn business establishments? Why should a revolt destroy banks? A popular revolt wants to transform all these into public property.”

The KKE attacked SYRIZA, a leftist coalition which the KOE participates in, and demanded it “stop patting the hooded rioters on the back.”

This kind of hostility toward violence is a sign of a party that has long ago given up on any revolutionary seizure of power. Meanwhile, it has recently begun developing a love for dogmatic orthodoxy to cover over its reformism.

During our current “[Winter Has its End](#)” investigations in Greece, we met and learned of many young communists who had become disaffected with the KKE because of this deep and increasingly explicit hostility to revolution and rebellion.

During this same period, the KOE had allied itself with anarchists and others active within the rebellions. The New Democratic party, Greece’s leading right-wing party, meanwhile found itself completely delegitimized and driven out of office after these upsurges. It was replaced in 2009 by the social-democratic PASOK (which is now being delegitimized in turn). New lines of demarcation were being drawn, radicals were re-aligning themselves, and a new phase of the struggle was just around the corner.

The Unexpected in Syntagma Square

In the midst of extreme austerity measures, including massive layoffs, privatizations, and price hikes... a rebellion was brewing. In May of 2011, something completely unexpected (at least in the view of the left) happened. A young unaffiliated radical contacted participants from Spain’s Arab Spring type movement. The comrades from Spain advised this young radical, who organized a call for an occupation and the formation of a people’s assembly in Syntagma Square.

On May 5, this movement hit the square with the demand of “real democracy,” consistently drawing crowds in the hundreds of thousands. It occupied the square and cohered a whole movement of youth who were new to political life. And this had emerged almost completely independently of the previously organized Greek left, an independence that comes with both strengths and real weaknesses.

Like many emerging political movements, the one in Syntagma Square has also brought out a mixed bag of politics. Many fascist and nationalist currents have tried to enter the square, and make it a movement of Greek nationalism (into a Greek version of the Tea Party). They raise populist slogans denouncing national treason by banker “traitors” and “thieves,” while distributing Greek flags. The KOE early on consciously began countering these forces in the square by bringing exponentially more flags from countries like Palestine, Egypt, Spain, and Tunisia to drown them out.

In a left with little internationalist support for Palestine, KOE was also one of the only organizations in Greece that stood with the Freedom Flotilla to Gaza, and made a point of bringing its members to speak to the people in Syntagma Square. It fought for internationalist resolutions from within the Square.

Since the early period of Syntagma's popular assembly, waves of police repression have repeatedly tried to expel the people from the various squares across Greece. During the late nights, people find themselves beaten, tear gassed and arrested. They find their tents and banners ripped and removed in the name of "sanitation." And every morning after, they come and re-occupy the square, and prepare to defend their radical center once again.

The Uncharted Road

What unfolded in Syntagma was not expected, and for much of the left in Greece, there is a real fury that something like this dared to develop without them. There is a painful irrelevance settling in on strategies that have no faith in the people and their uprisings, and instead wish to fold everything into official political arena and its parliament.

The one thing in this experience that I have been most impressed with was the KOE's creativity and willingness to shift when something unexpected happens, and at the same time holding on to a revolutionary strategy. Without calling for imposing a very different situation on our own in the U.S., I will say that I think there is a great deal to learn from the methods of revolutionaries like the KOE and others. And there are also things to learn about the intense tensions this has produced in and around KOE – as they try to resist tailing a new movement, as they try to replace discarded assumptions, and as they face inevitable generational differences (which are naturally intensified by new and younger recruitment).

On a more sober note, it is worth remembering that there is more to revolutionary creativity than simply 'jumping into' new and unexpected mass movements. There is a need to be creative precisely about finding ways to divert them toward a more sophisticated, crafted and ongoing revolutionary strategy. The point is that our creativity is not to be merely movement ambulance chasers or chameleon-like entrists in the upsurge-of-the-year, but that we need to prepare ourselves to be creative communists, to apply a mass line, to not find ourselves locked into particular tactics or campaigns especially when the world around us is creating unexpected openings and when those events are training a previously unengaged generation about politics and power.

Much remains to be seen. How the movement of the squares will develop, whether they will be able to sustain themselves after the formal adoption of the Greek austerity package, whether the new activists will radicalize, and whether the upsurge can even successfully overthrow the current government of Greece – all of that is (of course) still unclear. But we found this experience of regroupment, revolutionary struggle, and creativity by the Communist Organization of Greece to be both encouraging and thought-provoking.