

A One-Room School and Reclaiming Economic Sovereignty

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What Does a One-room Schoolhouse in Michigan Have to Do With Greece, Europe, Democracy and the Now Floundering Economic Globalization Experiment?

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Co-authored by Peter Block and John McKnight

On January 25th the far left Syriza Party won 149 seats out of 300 in Greece's parliamentary elections and formed a coalition with the fringe right wing independent party. Both parties are fused together in trenchant opposition to the austerity measures imposed on their country by the Troika (the European Commission, the European Central Bank and the International Monetary Fund) as a means of dealing with the aftermath of the 2008 Great Recession.

Alexis Tsipras, leader of the Syriza Party, is the new Prime Minister of Greece, a leader who carries a clear mandate from an overwhelming majority of the polis: defend our sovereignty. Accordingly he has managed to redraw the political fault lines, stepping over right-left dichotomies to frame a debate that is not just about anti-austerity but confronts the whole economic globalization model.

The promise of globalization is that, through technology, a liberal democracy and western corporate expansionism taken to scale will make the world a better place for everyone. It is a form of what some refer to as trickle-down economics, the belief that "a rising tide lifts all boats." In fact it only lifts yachts and cruise liners, leaving the handmade crafts of the poor in their wake. As an ideology it devalues playing small and thinking local. Scale and privatization is the only path to a single global economy.

In the last recession, Greece, Ireland, Portugal and Spain bankers were rescued, and citizens were made to suffer, which is to say that the rules of free-market economics were reinforced at the expense of citizens and government social programs. What was held sacred was the trading in a free market in support of banks and corporate interests. The Greeks — from young to older moderates — had had enough: a 25 percent fall in wages and 50 percent youth unemployment are just two of the many effects of so-called austerity.

The birth of modern globalization in 1944 — when the world's leading economists, politicians, bankers and corporate figures gathered at Bretton Woods, New Hampshire, to figure out what to do to mitigate the terrible devastation of World War II — launched the prevailing scarcity model of economics which up to now has been essentially unquestioned. With this Greek election, the conversation has been taken out of the hands of the economists and placed in the hands of citizens. In fact, an alternative local economy has been growing to provide livelihood and social services in the shadows of the normal measures of wage rates, documented unemployment and gross domestic product.

The election in Greece is an early fault line in the obscenity of the scarcity economic model. The Greek people endured the austerity measures to pay back predatory debt with no growth in the economy. It atomized both left and right. Also, the financial community is having an anxiety attack. Bank stocks are down. Interest rates for loans are up. The colonial retribution system has been mobilized. The election is called “populist,” “leftist.” Right up there with the old language of “retarded,” “handicapped,” and “disadvantaged.” And the solidarity movement is working, which is the most disturbing of all. This is a sign of the emergence of neighborhood and community principles as the force guiding citizens to take the future into their own hands.

The people of Greece have dissented en masse against a centralized global economic system that has hyper-accelerated worldwide corporate economic growth at the expense of the world's poorest populations and the planet. Now the citizens of Greece are seeking to halt the seemingly relentless shifts in power from central and local governments and communities toward global corporations, bond markets and the global bureaucracies they have created.

For and Against

The election in Greece can be seen as a symbolic and actual vote against scale and the commodification of cultures in favor of localism and the restoration of indigenous living. Peppered throughout the cheering crowds of Greek citizens gathered in Athens to celebrate the result were many international supporters of localism, from Portugal's Left Bloc to the Spanish Podemos party, but surely poor farmers throughout the world who have been displaced as a consequence of globalization must also have been cheering alongside environmental and public health activists, localism advocates and those committed to reducing the ever increasing gap between the super-rich the so-called bottom billion. So what have the Greeks voted for and what have they voted against?

Against

- Global Bureaucracy
- Massification
- Economies of Scale / Limitless Growth: Cheap labor; technology replaces people
- Competition
- Scarcity / Deficit Model / Consumerism

For

- Local Sovereignty and Democracy
- Localism
- Human Scale / Small Is Beautiful: Intermediate technologies; local jobs that respect and steward local ecologies
- Cooperation
- Community and Abundance

There is now every possibility that the ECB (largely influenced by Germany) will move to pull Emergency Liquidity Assistance that is currently keeping the banks from going under. Yet, there is every reason to be hopeful that that will not happen this time; for example, Mark Carney, the governor of the Bank of England, has called for debt forgiveness for Greece, warning that not to do so runs the risk of another "lost decade" for the EU. He's comment, though veiled, was clearly directed at the German drive towards austerity. History is often a useful arbitrator of what's possible; for the many who imagine that debt forgiveness simply is not possible, it's worth remembering what happened sixty-one ago: In 1953 in London an agreement was reached to cancel half of Germany's post-WWII debt. Germany's creditors

included Greece, who eagerly participated in the deal to reduce Germany's debt by 50 percent not just to keep Germany on side to defend against impending Communism, but also because Greece, along with other countries, recognized that repressive debt serves no human or just cause.

Forgiveness was instated swiftly, to prevent Germany falling into crisis, and contained little reference to their part in the War. It was a deal among equals, not based on sanctions and even including a clause that enabled West Germany to pay for debts out of its trade surplus; repayments were limited to three percent of export earnings every year. We have short memories when we are the creditor.

The Larger Point

Philosopher and social critic Ivan Illich said of economics that it "assumes scarcity. Therefore, it deals with values and calculations. It cannot seek the good that fits a specific person within a human condition. Where scarcity rules, ethics is reduced to numbers and utility. Further, the person engaged in the manipulation of mathematical formulas loses his ear for ethical nuance; one becomes morally deaf."*

This sheds significant light on why the moral rightness of debt forgiveness is eclipsed by the economic rightness of austerity. The economic model is morally bankrupt. But a new model is springing up phoenix-like from the ashes of austerity. Citizens are organizing bottom up what can be best described as an alternative economy, a gift economy.

Out-of-work professionals and nonprofessionals alike are mobilizing to connect and make productive their local assets. They have cut out the middle-man and are starting where they are and using what they have to rebuild their communities. This bottom-up approach is redefining democracy, rejecting representative government centric politics for a populist citizen-centered one. There is a belief now among citizens in the streets of Greece that if they don't rebuild their country no one else will. Their message to the Troika and other global interests is very clear: back off and let us get on with it.

More than 400 citizen-run groups — health-care clinics, food security coops, "without middlemen" distribution networks for fresh produce, legal aid hubs, education classes — have emerged in response to the austerity measures, and the movement

has more than doubled in size in the past three years, according to Jon Henly reporting in *The Guardian*.† That's because, says Christos Giovanopoulos of Solidarity for All, which provides logistical and administrative support to the movement, "[P]olitics comes down to individual people's stories. Does this family have enough to eat? Has this child got the right book he needs for school? Are this couple about to be evicted? ... It's kind of a whole new model, actually. And it's working."

Meanwhile, Back in Michigan

It's the same story being played out in Strange, Michigan, where Brenda Hydon teaches 18 students, ages 5 to 12, in a one-room schoolhouse.‡ There you see one teacher and a teacher aide demonstrating the possibilities of a learning site built on a community rather than a corporate model. If not new, a whole different model. And it's working.

The Strange School has operated in its current building since 1879, but its history and longevity are not the story here. What's important is that the teacher teaches, the older kids teach the younger, and the younger ones learn at their own pace by listening in. What's more, the arts of community are learned by in-school experience, the kids learn to be the productive keepers of a public place and the huge diversion from learning that is competitive sports is distanced.

And what does the Strange School have to do with Greece, Europe, and Democracy? What we have there is no nostalgic look in the rearview mirror, the practice of elementary education as some throwback to the past. Just like Solidarity for All in Greece, the school is an image of what's in store: a future where local citizens rely on one another to cope with the limits of the industrial model for everything, including the classroom.

* Ivan Illich, *"The Wisdom of Leopold Kohr," Fourteenth Annual E. F. Schumacher Lectures, October 1994, Yale University.*

† Jon Henly, "[Greece's Solidarity Movements: It's a Whole New Model — and It's Working](#)," *The Guardian*, January 23, 2015.

‡ See the Strange School [website](#) for its history; also see "[Lessons to Be Learned from a One-Room Schoolhouse](#)," the story the CBS Sunday Morning

show did on the school in June 2014.

The referenced media source is missing and needs to be re-embedded.

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The referenced media source is missing and needs to be re-embedded.

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The referenced media source is missing and needs to be re-embedded.

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