

Syriza is a fairly typical example of a left-wing popular front movement that forms to oppose what many see as an unholy alliance between local oligarchs and the international capitalist system as embodied in institutions like the IMF. But these movements are almost always deeply flawed both in their understanding of what they are fighting and in their own internal structure. The first problem is that they confuse oligarchy and crony capitalism with a genuine market-based capitalism, or think the latter is a utopian ideal with no real world applicability. This makes them sitting ducks for socialist ideology and that dismal, failed quest for “alternative models” which is wreaking such havoc today in countries like Venezuela, Cuba, and Argentina. The second problem is that the oligarchic nature of their economies is often rooted in social practices and cultural values that aren’t confined to the elites. The patterns of influence-peddling, nepotism, clientelism, and so on that, writ large, can be seen in the structure of these economies can also be seen in the structure of the parties, social movements, and small-business economic interests that are grouped together in these left-populist movements.

What happens, over and over again with a tiresome regularity, is that when these movements take power and try to fight the (truly) corrupt and dysfunctional economic powers of their old crony systems, they replace the old structure with a new structure that is as corrupt and crony-driven, but even less economically competent, than the leadership they displace. In some cases, the new leaders, at least initially, are idealistic and even ascetic in their personal habits and opposition to nepotism, but they are unable to change deeply engrained values and habits in the wider society. The idealists are driven back by the apparatchiks until the new society, as in Venezuela, is just as corrupt if not more so than the oligarchs it replaced, but immeasurably less competent—and in the end often more brutal. Additionally, the failures to deal with the micro-corruption and cronyism of small firms, professional associations and everyday personal dealings leaves the country’s most debilitating weaknesses largely untouched.

In these situations, and they are anything but rare around the world, populist anger against international capitalism is stoked by the ways in which the old oligarchy, thanks to its command of the state and, usually, the judiciary and bureaucracy, has been able to ensure that foreign investment and foreign-backed reforms are used to reinforce the oligarchy rather than blow it apart. Oligarchs are very good at alternating between mouthing “nationalist” slogans about fighting foreign investment when reforms would threaten their interests and promoting “technocratic” agendas when the goals of the foreign interests can be aligned with steps that would help them deepen their control at home.

Syriza in some ways seems to be just another iteration of this unhappy movement of flailing populism—like the Peronist populism of Argentina and the Chavez-style “Bolivarianism” of Venezuela, it is more a symptom of its country’s deeply rooted dysfunctions than it is a solution to problems of inequality and underdevelopment. Those wanting a brighter future for Greece and the Greeks are right to worry that the most likely end to Syriza’s adventure in popular revolt will be an impoverished and embittered society that is even less capable of the kind of modernization and development that it needs.

The protest movement represented today by Syriza has deep roots in Greek history, a subject that few Americans, even among senior policymakers, know anything about. For almost 200 years, European and American diplomats and policymakers have tried to influence Greek development with very mixed results. Both the British and, when they faltered, the Americans acted to prop up an oligarchic Greek leadership after World War II, both to help restart a Greek economy that had been catastrophically disrupted during the war and to organize a government that could win the bitter civil war against the Greek communists (many of whose descendants play important roles in Syriza today). Syriza's message resonates deeply with Greeks shaped by a history of foreign interventions that reinforced the position of the same elite that many blame for Greece's current woes.

These experiences inevitably shape the way many Greeks analyze contemporary developments, and the degree to which Greece is a captive of its past may set limits on how flexible and creative its responses to the current crisis can be. But sometimes history surprises us on the upside, and if Syriza is to do any good in Greece, attacking the oligarchic power structure of the country could be a very useful step.

In any case, while it is easy for people from cultures not afflicted by RFPS (Recurring Failed Populist Syndrome) to tsk-tsk at the misfortunes and the blindness of countries that can't seem to get out of the trap of oscillating between corrupt elite oligarchies and corrupt populist ones, it's also important to reflect on the cluelessness of foreign technocrats and development bureaucrats who get suckered over and over again by smart oligarchs. Through their own blindness and arrogance, the technocrats and economists in organizations like the IMF and the European Union have failed to lay the foundations in Greece for serious modernization and prosperity. The oligarchs and the elites—increasingly Western-educated, fluent in both English and the fashionable political and economic jargon of the hour—know how to tell the technocrats and foreign policymakers what they want to hear. The old Greek elite played Brussels like a piano, and some of Syriza's rage against the European technocratic elite is based on that elite's previous collusion with Greek oligarchs.

Problems like this can't be solved in a day. Neither the populists in Greece nor the technocrats in Brussels are ready and able to do what needs to be done. Ironically, this is one of the elements of ancient Greek tragedy: two flawed but, in their way, heroic characters producing a bad outcome that neither one truly deserves or desires—but that proceeds from the interplay of their individual flaws and misunderstandings. We can and should hope, and those of us so inclined should also pray, for more wisdom on both sides this time.

Syriza has some real idealism and youthful energy behind it, and the Greek public's deeply felt fury at its current situation is not unjustified. To the extent that this anger can be channeled to break up the cronyism that currently plagues Greece, so much the better. But there isn't much sign, yet, that Syriza either understands or is able to implement the kinds of changes Greece needs. We can and do hope for better things, but it would be

more prudent to bet that Syriza's rise marks Greece's descent into the world of failed populism than that the new government will lead Greece and Europe to a brighter future.