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### Charting Syriza's Swift Rise and Fall

Despina Lalaki

*CUNY New York City College of Technology*

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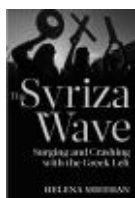
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## Charting Syriza's swift rise and fall

Review by Despina Lalaki

Issue #107: Reviews

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### The Syriza Wave: Surging and Crashing with the Greek Left

By Helena Sheehan

Monthly Review Press,  
2016 · 247 pages ·

\$26.00

Ayone interested in a comprehensive account of what happened in Greece between 2012 and 2016 – the struggles of the Left; the social devastation as a result of austerity; the rise, election, and capitulation of Syriza – should pick up Helena Sheehan's latest book *The Syriza Wave: Surging and*

*Crashing with the Greek Left*. Those already familiar with the period's political drama, in search of an opportunity to reengage with the debates of the time, should also read *The Syriza Wave*, for the book opens multiple windows on a story that is still unraveling.

Sheehan—a professor emerita at Dublin City University, the author of a number of books on Marxism, philosophy, science, media, and a political activist of the Irish and international Left with a longtime interest in Greece—offers us a thick description of one of the most extraordinary political stories of our time alongside lucid political reflection. Written as a travelogue and memoir, the book provides us with a detailed account of the author's own experiences with the rising Greek Left, while contextualizing and making explicit the history and underlying patterns of social and political relationships. Traveling often to Greece

after the collapse of Yugoslavia, Sheehan came to know the country quite intimately. Also from early on she became a supporter of Synaspismos—the Coalition of the Left, of Movements and Ecology, which was founded in 1991 as a party of the New Left, and in 2004 became the largest founding member of Syriza—and eventually, like many of the international Left, rode the Syriza wave.

Sheehan is really a “participant observer,” while her activism has always directly informed her scholarly work. In the author's words: “I had long ago adopted a participational theory of truth and believed that activism was epistemologically important in how I think and write. It is not only a matter of knowing things we


Issue #74 November 2010

## Obama's national security state

Issue contents

Top story

### Obama's national security state

Michael Ratner interviewed by  
Anthony Arnove

Features

**Leon Trotsky**  
Duncan Hallas

**Making free speech a crime**  
Nicole Colson

**The rise of anti-Muslim hate**  
Deepa Kumar

**What do socialists say about democracy?**  
Paul Le Blanc

**Mexico's revolution 1910–1920**  
Stuart Easterling

**The miners' strike of 1977–78**  
Adam Turl

Critical Thinking

would not know otherwise, but it is a way of speaking and writing about political subjectivity, about concepts such as the people, the movement, or the party.” Sheehan’s astute observations and political analysis build a story that largely unravels in two parts: in the first part the Syriza wave surges; in the second, it crashes. The wave metaphor had been quite popular in the national and international media trying to capture the rise of the Greek Left during the period in discussion. Syriza was either sending shock waves across the EU, threatening to upend the international markets, or was merely riding the wave of history. Depending on the commentator, Syriza’s agency was on occasion either exaggerated or downgraded. Sheehan’s Syriza, however, has unequivocally a strong agency emanating from the social movements, the older left of Synaspismos, the new party members, and the enthusiastic or reluctant nonmember supporters. Syriza, in Sheehan’s book, has the potential of developing tsunami waves.

The author places Syriza in its international context, departing from any notions of national exceptionalism. Moving primarily between Ireland and Greece, Sheehan was able to observe what she identified as the “Syriza effect” in Irish politics. “We don’t want to be like Greece, do we?” had been the Irish establishment’s motto, while the Greek Left would respond to the dominant narrative of Irish conformity and nonresistance with: “We are not Ireland. We will resist.” “As I saw it at the end of 2012,” Sheehan writes, “Greece was the crucible, where the best and worst of our civilization were in high-energy collision with each other. This was not some local battle.” Unlike other accounts of the Greek crisis either cramped with numbers or engaged with keyhole politics trying to recover information produced behind closed doors by high-ranking officials and specialists, Sheehan’s book is populated with people from all walks of life: university professors, members of parliament, party workers, trade union officials, journalists, teachers, doctors, lawyers, hotel staff, taxi drivers, shop assistants, waiters, and the unemployed. The politics she observes and discusses take place out in the open, in social media, in the streets.

Some of the most important themes raised in the first part of the book are the changing electoral politics bridging previously insurmountable historical differences among the Greek Left; the synthesis and combination of horizontal and vertical power and an intergenerational fertilization process; and the left criticism of Syriza, with the currency question often taking center stage. Academic activism and the role of intellectuals—national and international—is also a prominent theme that runs through the book.

In the first part of the book Sheehan focuses on a number of emblematic events: November 14, 2012—a day of coordinated general strikes and protests in Europe, organized by the trade unions; the gratifying, overwhelming experience of the occupation of ERT (the Greek public broadcasting corporation) – a hopeful example of workers’ control of the means of production for a rather prolonged period of time; the Syriza congress which consolidated the transition from a coalition to a unified party.

## Capitalism and alienation

Phil Gasper

## Reviews

### Can capitalism go green?

John McDonald reviews *Green Gone Wrong: How Our Economy Is Undermining the Environmental Revolution* by Heather Rogers

### Lenin and world revolution

Paul D'Amato reviews *Lenin's Political Thought: Theory and Practice in the Democratic and Socialist Movement* by Neil Harding

### The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte

James Illingworth reviews *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* by Karl Marx

### The Chinese revolution of 1925–27

Dennis Kosuth reviews *The Tragedy of the Chinese Revolution* by Harold Isaacs

### Obama: The man who couldn't

Scott McLemee reviews *The Obama Syndrome: Surrender at Home, War Abroad* by Tariq Ali

### Arab responses to Nazism

Sherry Wolf reviews *The Arabs and the Holocaust: The Arab-Israeli War of Narratives* by Gilbert Achcar

### The characters of early anarchism

Eric Kerl reviews *The World That Never Was: A True Story of Dreamers, Schemers, Anarchists, and Secret Agents* by Alex Butterworth

## Upcoming Articles

### Engels at the margins

John McDonald

Regarding the conference, Sheehan expresses concerns: “an issue was a tension between a mass party dominated by a charismatic leader and a small group around him, with a more passive membership and more flexibility about policy, versus one with an active membership and stronger collective accountability . . . I had to admit to having my worries about Syriza becoming the new Pasok [the Greek social democratic party].” Sheehan appears concerned with the prospect of a leftist government which would “merely manage capitalism in a superficially less offensive way,” in the words of a *Socialist Voice* author.

In 2013, two strikes—by metro workers and teachers—further escalated tensions and openly challenged the coalition government by opposing a new round of public-sector cuts. Despite the rich analysis of many other events, Sheehan only briefly discusses the teachers’ mobilization without probing deeply enough. Both strikes merit additional attention for the potential they carried, transcending old union politics and radicalizing the anti-austerity movement at a time when Syriza was increasingly shying away from street politics and focusing instead on appeasing ruling elites abroad and at home. Sheehan further discusses the European elections and the Thessaloniki Program, first presented by Alexis Tsipras, Syriza’s leader in September 2014, which promised to confront the humanitarian crisis, restart the economy and promote tax justice, institute national planning to restore employment, and transform the political system. The culmination of the drama is reached with Syriza’s election victory in January 2015 and the resounding referendum of July 2015, in which Greek voters rejected the harsh the bailout conditions proposed by the European Commission, the IMF, and the European Central Bank, only for Syriza to agree to them anyway. A more systematic treatment of the phenomenon of the rise of the Golden Dawn and the anti-fascist movement would have further added to the book’s many strengths, since the narrative of the two extremes framed much of the public discussion throughout this period and circumscribed to a great extent Syriza’s politics.

The second part of the book one can read as the de-escalation of the drama or the beginning of a new one. It raises questions regarding Syriza’s theoretical grounding as well as its negotiation and governance strategies. It opens with the Democracy Rising conference, which took place days after the referendum and Syriza’s capitulation. In an extremely tense atmosphere in the lecture halls of the School of Law national and international scholars, activists and students passionately debated what had just happened, the prospects of Syriza governing as a party of the Left, the prospective consequences for the European Left at large. Shying away from providing any definitive answers in her conference talk “Ghosts of Alternatives Past,” Sheehan asked, “What are the dynamics of attempting to forge an alternative in the face of the hegemony of there-is-no-alternative? How to make history in conditions not of our making? . . . How could Syriza . . . advance both its immediate program and a new path toward socialism?”

Profoundly disappointed, not merely with the capitulation of the government but

**“Rise like lions after slumber”**

—Percy Bysshe Shelly

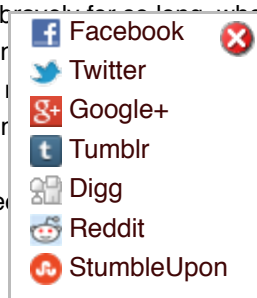
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also its alienation from the party and the movements, Sheehan evaluates through her interviewees and discussants some of Syriza's fault lines as well as the prospects of the Left's recomposition, especially after the break of the left wing of Syriza and the large exodus of dissidents both from the government and the party. Sheehan summarizes her own conclusions as follows:

The bigger question is whether there can be a left government within an ever more powerful global capitalism. . . . It is hard to give an optimistic answer. Yet what should we do? Concede that social democratic reform is the best we can ever do? Hope for an insurrection? Give up on impacting on the global economy or the nation-state and build cooperatives and alternative social structures? I say no to those questions. Syriza was the flagship project in the strategy of building broad left parties to merge the best of older left traditions with the energies and insights of newer social movements, to challenge for state power, to initiate concrete reforms within capitalism with a view to transcend it in the direction of socialism. The capitulation of Syriza dealt this strategy a bitter blow, but it did not invalidate it. It remains, for me, the way to go. So while I no longer support Syriza, I support LAE, the GUE-NGL, the Party of the European Left, and right2Change in Ireland. While they are fraught with limitations and imperfections, they have not crossed over to the other side and contain some seeds of possibility.

Though sympathetic to Syriza's fundamental premise about the irrelevance of the old reform-versus-revolution debate, Sheehan's politics appear to embrace strategies of rupture and broader social radicalization. She maintains that even though "much . . . mobilization is in the electoral arena . . . one of the many vital lessons from the Syriza experience is that government is not power." Having dedicated her book "To the Greek left, who struggled so hard to bring forth Syriza, who will transcend Syriza," I think of a positive message rather hidden in the wave metaphor. It is important to keep in mind that ocean waves may travel thousands of miles across the land while they also differ in height, duration, and shape. We cannot predict. Yet one thing is certain; never has a wave not been followed by others.



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