

The Greek crisis from the perspective of a German social psychologist

Yesterday night, thousands of people in Greece have protested against the Greek government and pleaded the parliament not to accept the new deal between their government and the European institutions. They believe that the new measures to reduce the debt will drive Greece not out of the problems but deeper into them while at the same time putting unbearable strain on the individual people. I do not know whether they are right or wrong - I am not an economist and my perception is that the economists all over the world, even including Nobel laureates, are heavily divided in their opinions whether further savings are the key to solving the long standing crisis or not.

I am a social psychologist. And what I do know is that the crisis and how it is managed by both the Greek government, particularly in the past months, and the European institutions (and as a German, I acknowledge that this to a large extent means by Mrs. Merkel and Mr. Schäuble) affects the people and it does so in an extremely negative way.

As a social psychologist I know that any sort of salient group boundaries is not normally suited to resolve conflict but that boundaries typically worsen the conflict. Schäuble and Merkel try to defend the German taxpayer's money and that is what they were elected for. But at the same time it seems that they have a hidden agenda, namely the prevention of Syriza having any success - because this would support the left parties in Germany and other European countries.

Tsipras and Varoufakis, on the other hand, seem to have had their own hidden agendas in the past weeks. It is indeed very difficult to understand why Tsipras so badly wanted the referendum and wanted the Greek people to say "no" and only a few days later he proposes the same new interventions to the parliament that he so fiercely rejected before. I, and many other Germans, do not understand this and think that it is playing tricks more than serious politics. The same applies to Varoufakis (by the way: I deem it perfectly legitimate for a politician to come to a meeting by motorbike and without a tie - but showing the finger and then denying it although it is on television is simply unprofessional!). Famous social psychologist Roy Baumeister has shown over and over again that people do not want to be isolated or rejected. And when they feel isolated or rejected they respond with negative, sometimes irrational, behavior and they get into a prevention mode, i.e. they do not see opportunities and take risks anymore but look for safety first and foremost.

We have found in our own studies with Yannis Markovits that the crisis made Greeks acting in such a prevention mode and in consequence being dissatisfied and less committed - and prevention, low satisfaction and low commitment do further damage to the economy in Greece. We have to put an end to all this now. We have start acting more as a "WE" rather than a "Them" and "Us" in Europe. We are one community and communities need to show solidarity - this is its key purpose. Many Germans are ashamed of Schäuble and Merkel playing the bad guys and hardliners in Europe. We want the crisis to be over and most Germans have understood that Greece will never be

able to repay the debt anyway. And rather than forcing Greece to invest the little money they have and the new money from new "rescue" programs in repaying the interest to the IMF and other institutions, we should start helping the Greek economy to grow and to help the people living a decent life. Because the Greek people suffer - no money from the institutions so far has helped them - it has only helped the Greek and in turn other European) banks!

Therefore, Germans are also protesting. At the same time as Greeks in Athens went on the streets yesterday, several thousand Germans in Berlin and other cities went out to rally against Schäube and Merkel. This is clearly not the majority - but a (slight) majority of the German people in representative surveys still wants to Greece remain in the Euro zone. I very much hope that this is seen as a sign of solidarity of the German people to the Greek people. My personal experiences with the Greek people (as extremely hospitable hosts on vacations and as smart and hard working colleagues in academia) have always been extremely positively and I hope, for everyone involved, that soon there will be a possibility of a restart for the whole debate so that we get over the well-learned rituals of politics and back to what politics should be for: Leading in times of crisis for the best of the people!

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