

Synthesis: an Anglophone Journal of Comparative Literary Studies

No 9 (2016)

Living through the Interregnum



The Weak Must Not Any More Than The Strong

Rajagopalan Radhakrishnan

doi: [10.12681/syn.16229](https://doi.org/10.12681/syn.16229)

Copyright © 2016, Rajagopalan Radhakrishnan



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution 4.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/).

The Weak Must Not Any More Than The Strong

R.Radhakrishnan

Greek crisis is in the same breath and in the same thought Europe's crisis. It is not also Europe's crisis, or by extension or only epiphenomenally Europe's crisis. The relationship between Greece and Europe at large is one of irrefragable co-evalness: a relationship of identity in difference and difference in identity. It is an act of unabashed ideological disavowal to pathologise and singularise the Greek crisis and read it out of solidarity with the European situation. The purpose of this panel is to explore critically the relationship between solidarity as an *a priori* and the historical emergence of the putative 'weakest link,' a connection which is all too quickly criminalised and stigmatised so that solidarity can be reterritorialised hegemonically, in this instance, with the German imprimatur masquerading as Europe's proper name. How indeed did the weakest link emerge as a historical consequence of European solidarity? The answer is of course obvious and self-evident: solidarity was always already structured in dominance and structural unevenness. Any structuring of solidarity implies a fundamental double-consciousness whereby every unit within the solidarity is both for itself in autonomy; and heteronomous, in good faith with respect to the larger collectivity of which it is a part, though not a fungible part. From Germany to Greece, each nation is an 'unequally equal' part of the European continuum on the assumption of the underlying rationale: from each according to its ability, to each according to its need.¹ In other words, the weaker partners in their very less than equalness bear on their body politic the equal sovereignty of all Europe. If the solidarity, from its very ideological conception, was receptive in affirmation to the anomalies and contradictions of an uneven collectivity, why is it then that during times of crisis, a crisis written inevitably into the very constitution of the solidarity, the weakest link is turned into the singular and localised symptom of the crisis? Why does it become unthinkable to articulate Europe from the point of view of and in the name of the weakest link? Why does the term 'weakest link' turn from a mere descriptive

phrase into a stigma?²² Why is it made to seem that the more than equal partners within Europe are being gratuitously generous in their acts of 'bail out?' Isn't that their function and obligation? Why does it not sound egregiously unethical and invasive when the rest of Europe and the financial institutions thereof interfere with the internal sovereignty of Greece and demand that the Greek nationals be subjected to measures of austerity not sanctioned by their own government? Why should Greece be governed and represented by an extra-territorial authority rather than by its own elected representatives?

The crisis by and large has been coded as economic with politics tagged as a mere by product or as unnecessary ideological baggage. Gone from the discourse is the category of 'political economy' that actualised the relationship between politics and economics as one of on going tension, with economics pretending, in the name of the marketplace, to be value-free and neutral, and politics insisting on fair play and the necessary safeguards and mechanisms of distributive justice, and issues of equal representation and sovereignty in the context of unequal economic power. But a Europe governed primarily by financial institutions (The European System of Financial Supervision, ESFS) functions as a post-historical and post-political programme of action that perceives politics and ideology as the naturalised preserve of dominant or hegemonic nations. In other words, within the unequal solidarity known as Europe, a solidarity articulated on the basis of inequality among the constituent nation states, political sovereignty is no more a principle of equality among nation states. Instead, political sovereignty has become a conditional guarantee: if the weaker nation states are prepared to violate their intra-national imperatives at the altar of pan-European survivability, then they will be granted the freedom to be politically sovereign. A people who cannot afford any more austerity, any more penny pinching, will have to immiserate themselves in an act of neo-colonial surrender to 'pure' economic restructuring; or else, they will be expelled from the Union. In this neo-colonial formula, Greece's political accountability to itself is violently sublated and yoked to a 'higher ideal' it cannot afford, but afford alas it must: or else. The choice facing the weaker nations is: Lose, Lose. Either you lose by failing to comply with the demands made by Greater Europe and thereby get booted out; or comply and suffer the consequences of a pyrrhic triumph over one's own political will.

The plebiscite initiated by Mr. Tsipras ended up thematising the many contradictions and incommensurabilities that constituted the crisis. The most important questions were: Who should have the authority to decide and on what

mandate? Who is to decide, and on the basis of what expertise, what is best for Greece and its people? The first question is legal-procedural, and the second substantive; and of course, the two questions are deeply inter-related. What if populist will made the wrong choice? What if the right answer emanated from an illegitimate source? Should the choice be national, politically speaking? Who are the people in this case: people interpellated by the vague but important idea called Europe, or people interpellated by the nation state called Greece? What should be the correct and normative relationship between the two interpellations; and furthermore, should there be a clash between the two, which sovereignty should prevail? In this context, is Europe a transnational idea, an intangible and yet empirically binding 'spiritual principle,' to invoke Ernest Renan, an essentialist article of faith?³ Or is Europe in fact an imperative that shores up transnationalism in the name of dominant nation states? What is the connection between populism as people's experiential-existential will and the juridical template under which people become 'political people' as Greek citizens or European trans-citizens? What was interesting in the case of the Tsipras-inspired plebiscite was that in one fell move the Greek people were simultaneously re-empowered as Greek subjects and called upon to make the decision of their lives, and demoted from their status of '*demos*' to the mere affective visceral-animality of the multitude.

The sovereignty of the Greek people/subjects was thrown into taxonomic and conceptual disarray between intra-national Greek sovereignty and European transnational hegemony. So who are the Greek subjects/people in this context of profound dissidence between Greece and EU? When they speak, what would be the consequences? Are they just speaking, or, are they 'speaking for?' Would it matter at all, and to whom, what they decided? Was the plebiscite no more than a muscular ritual of political will, full of nothing but symbolism? Why could the case not be made, given the trans-national nature of the European Union, that the jurisdiction of the Greek plebiscite was, speaking synecdochically, was also European in nature? When the Greek people spoke, whether their decision was right or wrong, wise or foolish, why would that not resound affirmatively with the other national peoples of Europe?

The abject ambivalence of the plebiscite, caught untenably as it was between the political national imaginary and the economic imaginary of the European Union, rendered it simultaneously hyper and hypo-political: on the one hand, a political parody and on the other a subaltern interrogation with no listener or interlocutor

except the embattled insider.⁴ The real question became: who was watching, who was listening? Was the plebiscite an exercise in solipsistic rebellion? Whose bluff was being called? Was Tsipras betraying his subjects by absolving himself of the responsibility of representation and seeking the utopian spontaneism of direct democracy; or was he effectively thumbing his nose at the untenable dominant disposition of the European Union in the person of Angela Merkel? After all, the people can only exercise their right to choose, but they are not supposed to know what is good for them. That is the job of the elected political leaders. The Greek subject feels on the one hand both abandoned and empowered by the symbolic grandstanding of its chosen leaders; and on the other hand, it is being taught the lesson of economic viability by the European Union who by definition cannot speak for it. Political stability and self-esteem on the one hand; and on the other hand, ruthless economic assimilation, not on their terms, with the European Union. Viability has to be either economic or political. Weaker nations (the PIGS whose situation has been brilliantly rendered by David Lloyd in this round table) who suffer the ailment of economic viability have to perforce sacrifice their right to raise the issue of political viability. In a model that privileges economic viability, political viability, especially for the weaker nations, can only be a trickle down effect of a secure economic viability. No economic viability, ergo, no political viability.

Now that the political has been weaned away from the economic, and everything economic rendered aseptic from political contamination, economic viability can now be parsed as pure scientific fact beyond any kind of historical and genealogical analysis or unpacking. Some nations and some peoples are just that way: economically non-viable. The all-important question: viable or non-viable by what standards, and established by what authority, cannot be raised at all. That the PIGS, under the new European dispensation, cannot, for systemic and structural reasons, live up to their prescribed levels of viability is 'an ideological fact' that is swept under the rug. In other words, the debacle and the bankruptcy of the PIGS is very much an intended consequence of the New European Deal. Even as Europe is touted as a transnational ethic, this very ethic requires, as its underlying constitutive rationale, the performative reality of the various nation states that make up the European continuum.

The nation-state, under this new episteme, is made thoroughly schizophrenic, or perhaps bipolar is the better term. Thus, for example, depending on how you view it, the PIGS as nation states remain what they have always been: second class citizens at best, or poor relatives under the aegis of the joint family known as

Europe. But duplicitously, and at the same time, as poor relatives they are expected to partake of, along with their affluent relatives, the menu of a gilt-edged ten star restaurant, and divide the bill equally. It is either that, or the other option is: sit at the same table, gaze at the same menu, but order just sparkling water, and perhaps a minimal salad. This way, all those who attended the banquet could be seen in public view as having walked in and out of the restaurant, hand in hand, in absolute egalitarian amity. If some one like a Yanis Varoufakis were to become obstreperous enough to shout out in indignation, “Hey, what happened to the initial motto of ‘each according to etc.....’” that articulates the very basis of the solidarity, he would be immediately castigated as a political agitator who is willfully misreading a binding economic imperative. My point, to reiterate, is not to deny that the Greek administration has made its own mistakes of irresponsibility, or gainsay the reality of the many bailouts. My point is that whereas the strong nations in the so-called continuum are effective ‘political economies,’ the PIGS are forced to function as depoliticised or deracinated economies or perform the ritual of decapitated political will: the ritual of ‘Greek’ with ‘Greek’ under total erasure. The continuum is after all not a continuum at all, just as analogously, modernity never was an equalizer, but was an instead a continuing perpetrator of colonial inequality in the name of a dehistoricised modernity.

Yanis Varoufakis, begins his recent book with the ironically poignant title with an interrogative end (reminding me of Partha Chatterjee’s early work *Nationalist Thought and the Colonial World?*), *And the Weak Suffer What They Must?* with a few intense childhood recollections of growing up in Greece but with an overarching awareness of Europe, Germany in particular. This early recollection gives us a snapshot of Europe then versus Europe now, offering us a study in discontinuity.

My family’s strange red blanket ritual began in 1967, the inaugural year of Greece’s military dictatorship. Deutsche Welle, the German international Radio station that my parents were listening to, became our most precious ally against the crushing power of state propaganda at home: a window looking out to faraway democratic Europe. At the end of each of its hour-long special broadcasts on Greece, my parents and I would sit around the dining table while they mulled over the latest news. Not understanding fully what they were talking about neither bored me nor upset me. For I was gripped by a sense of excitement at the strangeness of our predicament: that, to find out what was happening in our own Athens, we had to travel, through the airwaves-veiled by a red blanket-to a place called Germany. (1)

What is genuinely bracing and liberating about this recollection, despite the besieged and undemocratic condition of Greece at that point in history, is the

confidence with which the recollection makes a valid relational connection of solidarity between home as present prison and the free world as Europe: far, but conceptually and ideologically available and intimate. Athens is instantly territorialised, de- and re-territorialised in this recollection as despair and hope, as problem and potential solution. On the basis of this organic relationality parsed as solidarity, Greece is not branded as lowly beneficiary and Germany anointed as noble and philanthropic benefactor. On the contrary, all of Europe is named and recognized contradictorily but integrally as dictatorship and democracy. To be forced to travel to Germany along the airwaves to know the truth about Germany comes across as both topic and exo-topic. There is a relationship of commitment and accountability adumbrated here and within the red blanket, Greece in its present history of dictatorship and in need of help from free Germany and free Europe comes across as both heteronomous and autonomous, in fact heteronomous in autonomy and autonomous in heteronomy. If indeed all of Europe is a democratic family, then, Greece in need of a security blanket from Germany is no different from a down and out family member seeking help from a more fortunate and better-placed family unit. Where is the harm and shame in that, or where the so-called magnanimity and charity?

“The European Union,” Varoufakis argues, as he fast forwards that vision in history, “could even pose as a blueprint that the rest of the world might draw courage and inspiration from so as to eradicate divisions and establish peaceful coexistence across the planet.” He waxes rhapsodic in the name of “a commonwealth” to be made “feasible where reason, democracy, respect for human rights and a decent social safety net would provide its multinational, multilingual, multicultural citizens with the stage on which to become the women and men that their talents deserved.” There is the utopic dream “of the erection of common institutions, the tearing-down of ludicrous borders that previously scarred the continent.” (4).

This entire imagining is political, ethical, conceptual, and philosophical, and helps us in asking the question, “What or Who is Europe?” and what is the nature of European commonality? Is the basis spiritual, religious, economic, cultural, political, symbolic? It is interesting to note that in the Varoufakis’s vision, Economics is neither named or invoked as a terrain: all the more interesting considering that, for God’s sake, he is an economist first and foremost. The reason for this seeming oversight, I would argue, is that Varoufakis refuses to yield all ‘currency’ to the mediation known as Economics. Of course he is aware of all the

problems, asymmetries, inequalities, contradictions, and incommensurabilities that Economics is home and heir to: but his point is that the putative common ground of Europe, the putative common ground as Europe ought not be held captive to Economics as the only and/or dominant determinant of solidarity. “Then came Wall Street’s implosion in 2008 and the ensuing global disaster. Nothing would be the same again.” Ferociously discrediting the facile thesis that divides Europe into ant nations and grasshopper nations, Varoufakis makes the case that “the real cause of the eurozone crisis” has “nothing to do with the behavior of grasshoppers or ants or any such thing. It is to do with the eurozone itself and, specifically, with the invention of the euro. Indeed, this book is about a paradox: European peoples, which had hitherto been uniting so splendidly, have ended up increasingly divided by a common currency”(6).

What is insidious is the manner in which ‘representation,’ a fundamentally political modality is hijacked from the realm of the political to the domain of economic institutions, such as Banks. When Banks become vehicles of representations rather than elected governments, or populist voices, what we have in play is a solvency market where those who have strong bank accounts automatically embody representation, i.e., banks become both the substance and mode of representation (Banks tautologously represent themselves and their economic sufficiency and might), whereas the weaker accounts neither “speak” nor “speak for.” What takes place behind the screen is the political shoring up of economic viability: the stronger nations, in the name of economics, anchor themselves to their national base, while the weaker nations are bereft both of economic viability and political clout. As Varoufakis would have it. “However, there was a great difference between Britain and countries like Greece: while Gordon Brown could rely on the Bank of England to pump out the cash needed to save the City of London, eurozone governments had a central bank whose charter did not allow it to do the same. Instead, the burden of saving the inane bankers fell on the weakest citizens”(5).

The point that Varoufakis is making is that the eurozone based on the common currency of the euro is nothing short of a program of neocolonial standardisation where the very standard is the carrier and implementer of distributive inequality. To put it differently, unlike the other vision of solidarity that held so much promise, this blueprint is one of dominant unification, or at best, hegemonic unification that resorts to the violence of representation, i.e., subordinates the performative and differential play of representation to the dictatorial needs of a false unity that

precedes and censors representation. Thus, Europe speaking for itself in the name of the dominant economies is validated as the representation of a unified Europe whereas the self-representation of the PIGS of Europe is purged from Europe's self image. The unification takes the form of a victory, a unification minus: a unification minus the political will of the weaker nations. The other reality is that under these so-called new circumstances, the sovereignty of the nation state still matters. In the case of Britain, there is a one to one representational relationship between currency and sovereignty, whereas in the case of the diffuse eurozone, the stronger nations within the zone continue to be benefited by the euro on the assumption that the weaker nations will take the heat to keep the unification alive.

In a recent essay, Etienne Balibar et al, commenting on the Brussels diktat, bring up, in the context of the Greek-German relationship, the question of history, of memory, counter-memory and amnesia, to remind us that we cannot understand the nature of the present crisis in isolation, and without reference to the European past. This following passage from that incisive essay raises the crucial issue of perspective: the agreement, and the eurozone, from what or whose point of view.

"Seen from Greece, the agreement seems to be well and truly like a diktat. Varoufakis went so far as to mention 'Versailles,' a provocative allusion to the 1918 treaties which had well known repercussions for German history and the rest of the world. The accusation was sufficiently serious and credible for Merkel to state immediately that she is unconcerned with "historical comparisons'...."⁵ It is not surprising that history and memory should matter to the subaltern and not the dominant or the hegemonic. Once history is ruled out of 'concern,' prescriptions such as austerity measures for Greece and the weak nations can be administered as benign and neutral acts of restructuring, even if such measures result in the liquidation of the sovereignty of the subaltern nations.

To get a diagnostic understanding of the eurozone situation, I turn again to the Balibar essay. Here is a passage that demonstrates how measures that are touted to be purely economic and institutional intend deep, far-reaching, deleterious political consequences for the weaker nations: that dire and radical upheavals in subaltern nations such as Greece have their cause elsewhere. What is indeed happening is the political dismantling of the weaker nations by extra-territorial forces and flows. The Greek plebiscite was in response not to an agenda from within, but from an imposition from without. It was in fact a profound anti-plebiscite masquerading as plebiscite. The fact that the Greek populist will had to be mobilised to accept a proposal that was not backed by their own Greek national imprimatur makes the

plebiscite anti-democratic. A people on the brink were in fact were being asked to vote for or against political survival.

Finally, it must be mentioned that the necessity for a governmental shuffle (meaning the entry of anti-Syriza parties and the expulsion of 'radicals') is a foregone conclusion in the corridors of the Brussels Commission. Materially, this means that the austerity measures and the trusteeship reinforce one another as policies, so that Greece is no longer a sovereign nation (in any sense since this process started years ago and was only halted by Syriza's rise to power). Unfortunately what this means is not that Greece is entering into a shared sovereignty—judicially equal and politically organized as would imply a progression towards European federalism—but instead that it is bowing to the will of the master. Which 'Master,' however, are we talking about? It is at this point that we must look at the other side of the coin: the European Union. (Balibar et al)

The question that Balibar is asking is: "In short, we must ask ourselves what sort of 'regime' is modern Europe under?" For indeed, what is happening, despite all the economic-institutional-bureaucratic camouflage, is a regime change by way of what Balibar and Jurgen Habermas, among many others, have called "a post-democratic *fait accompli*." While making the argument how "one power structure conceals another," Balibar also drives home the truth that "the Commission, being now no more than a (proliferating) regulatory structure and transmission belt, lost the power of negotiation to the Eurogroup: a group established by no treaty and following no rule, whose internally elected president then serves as a spokesperson for the most powerful and most influential of the member states-Germany, in other words" (Balibar et al).

How is Greece, or for that matter any of the weaker partners in any solidarity, supposed to deal with what is a systemic or structural *fait accompli*? The problem with a *fait accompli* is that it is indeed engineered in the name of dominance, with agency intended for the strong and withheld from others. It is one thing to understand the *fait accompli* as *fait accompli* and persist under its jurisdiction helplessly and inevitably thus consecrating and naturalising the 'done deal' as part of reality; and it is something quite other to combat and repeal or reverse the done-ness of the deal by opening up a different historiography. Should the latter move be envisaged from within deconstructively and strategically as a Gramscian war of position, or is a war of 'maneuver' conceivable from 'without?' As I have briefly commented earlier in the essay, the question mark that inflects the title of the Varoufakis book points towards a Gramscian pessimism of the intellect and optimism of the will. In other words, the so called 'negative wisdom' that the 'weak must suffer what the must' is posed in the interrogative with the strong suggestion

of a revolutionary 'break' in the future from what seems a 'must' in the history of the present.

It is vital that Varoufakis relies on the *longue durée* to recall ancient Greek history in active and meaningful conjuncture with the history of the present both to suggest that this is nothing new and simultaneously enable a recalcitrant will capable of saying No to the punishing inhumanity of the done deal. I go again to the Varoufakis text.

Forty years later, in 1988, while looking through Keynes's papers and books at King's College, Cambridge, I noticed a copy of Thucydides' *Peloponnesian War* in the original ancient Greek. I took it out and quickly browsed through its pages. There it was, underlined in pencil, the famous passage in which the powerful Athenian generals explained to the helpless Melians why 'rights' are only pertinent 'between equals in power' and, for this reason, they were about 'to do what the pleased with them'. It was because 'the strong actually do what they can and the weak suffer what they must' (p.19)

Apart from the incisive juxtaposition of ancient Greece with Bretton Woods by way of Keynes, Varoufakis calls the bluff of an equality anchored in inequality and initiates the challenge of how to respond to the paralysing and demoralising imperative of such historical lesson that condemns the weak to the chronic "must" of suffering. Is there even a way to answer back, reverse perspectives, and instrumentalise a different praxis on the basis of such a bleak knowledge, and move beyond the vicious impasse? What can the Melians say or how can they respond from the heart of their abjection? Is there a different lesson to be learned from this situation by whom, and in whose name? And here is how the Melians respond in the Thucydides text.

Then in our view (since you force us to base our arguments on self-interest, rather than on what is proper) it is useful that you should not destroy a principle that is to the general good—namely that those who find themselves in the clutches of misfortune should....be allowed to thrive beyond the limits set by the precise calculation of their power. And this is a principle which does not affect you less, since your own fall would be visited by the most terrible vengeance, watched by the whole world. (20)

This answer breaks out of the calculus that sets the ration between 'power' and the right to thrive, and in addition, articulates a compelling connection between 'value' and 'interest' and in the process transforms possibilities of vesting interest: not my interest versus yours in a zero-sum, winner take all world, but a world of mutual learning in the name of all participants. Of course, there is the stern warning to the dominant self interest that there will be a time of comeuppance: in other the dominant self-interest is in a state of delusional triumph.

Under such conditions, how will or should Greece or other such perilously positioned weak nations in the European Union parse and understand and honor the solidarity to Europe? What dictates solidarity: politics, economics, culture, philosophy, ideology, spirituality, Christendom, Occidental Being? Is solidarity a form of essentialism? What aspects of solidarity are breakable, and which fundamental and inalienable; and who decides? Is the axis of solidarity mono or polyvalent? If Greece and a number of other subaltern nations in the European Union find themselves compared to third World nations on the basis of economic criteria, should they then realign themselves in an axis of solidarity with Southern non-European nations with whom they do share a common history: a genealogy repressed and disavowed by regimes of Colonial Modernity? Would such an “affiliation,” be in violation of a more natural ‘filiation’ with the West, Europe, Christendom? Would Greece, Turkey, Italy, and so on look completely out of place in alignment with Asian and African nations? All solidarities come with a price. Of all the different bearers of solidarity such as class, culture, political ideology, race, ethnicity, etc. which one is to be stressed, and when and why? If class consciousness as Marx argued is not natural but the result of a critical and symptomatic and often counter-intuitive reading of reality, then perhaps, the time has come to re-identify and re-recognize Europe in the name of its weakest links. Out of such critical recognition, there could well emerge a different cartography of global relationality.

However difficult it may be to predict or envision the contours of this revolutionary cartography to come, it is important to turn tables on the crisis and wrest knowledge away from the crisis in the name of the so-called loser. It is not a coincidence at all that Varoufakis dedicates his book to his mother thus. “For my mother Eleni, who would have savaged with the greatest elegance and compassion anyone contemplating the notion that the weak suffer what they must.”

¹ This motto goes all the way back to Louis Blanc (1851) and is popularised by Karl Marx in his 1875 *Critique of the Gotha Program*.

² It is not a coincidence that there was a popular ‘real life’ British TV show called “The Weakest Link” whose selling point was the identification and elimination of the weakest link in a team.

³ See Ernst Renan, “What is a Nation?” in *Nation and Narration*, ed. Homi K. Bhabha.

⁴ Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's essay, "Can the Subaltern Speak?" resonates well in this context.

⁵ 9 Etienne Balibar, Sandro Mezzadra, and Frieder Otto Wolf, "The Brussels diktat: and what followed," open Democracy, July 2015.

Works Cited

- Balibar, Étienne, Sandro Mezzadra, and Frieder Otto Wolf. "The Brussels diktat: and what followed," openDemocracy, July 2015.
<https://www.opendemocracy.net/can-europe-make-it/etienne-balibar-sandro-mezzadra-frieder-otto-wolf/brussels-diktat-and-what-follow>
- Renan, Ernest. "What is a Nation?" *Nation and Narration*. Ed. Homi K. Bhabha. New York: Routledge, 1990: 8-22.
- Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty. "Can the subaltern speak?" *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*. Ed. C. Nelson and L. Grossberg. Urbana / Chicago: U of Illinois P, 1998: 272-313.
- Varoufakis, Yanis. *And The Weak Suffer What They Must? Europe's Crisis and America's Economic Future*. New York: Nation Books, 2016.