

By Stathis Kouvelakis / 26 June 2016

In a piece for [Mediapart](#) Stathis Kouvelakis analyses what's at stake after Brexit. He is reader in political philosophy at KCL, a former member of the Syriza central committee and now a member of Popular Unity. Translated by David Broder



Stathis Kouvelakis was a member of the Syriza central committee when that party won the January 2015 Greek election. He was then among those who decided to break with prime minister Alexis Tsipras, instead advocating that Greece leave the Eurozone and make a clear break with EU institutions. He teaches and lives in London, and here he gives Mediapart his analysis of the consequences of the UK referendum.

Mediapart: How would you read the vote for Brexit?

Stathis Kouvelakis: The first thing to note is that the European Union loses all referendums over proposals emanating from the EU or which concern EU authority. The unconditional defenders of the European project have to ask themselves why that is the case. But this is the first time that the question of remaining or leaving has been posed directly. And in my view the fact that one of the three big European countries has chosen to break away from the EU marks the end of the current European project. This result definitively reveals something we knew already, namely that this was a project built by and for elites, and which did not enjoy popular support.

So are you pleased?

Yes. Certainly this legitimate rejection of the EU risks being hijacked by right-wing and xenophobic forces, as the British referendum campaign showed. But I think that it could also be an opportunity for progressive forces in struggle against a neoliberal and authoritarian Europe — that is, the EU such as it exists. I think that anti-neoliberal forces of the Left can find more of an expression in other countries than they can in the United Kingdom. It is true that in Britain "Lexit" was very barely audible, and there was a fracture between the leaders of the main political and trade-union forces on the Left and their popular and working-class base, which in its great majority rejected the EU.

The Labour Party saw a split between, on the one hand, its MPs and party machine, and on the other hand a large portion of its voters. Its organisers and members were torn between the two. Moreover its current leader Jeremy Corbyn is in fact very hostile to the EU, but was forced to campaign for Remain given the power relations within the party machine and the Parliamentary Labour Party.

In February 2015, when I was still part of the Syriza central committee, I attended a big rally at the TUC building in London to celebrate our party's victory in Greece. Jeremy Corbyn — who at that time no one thought might become Labour leader — came over to speak to me at the side of the meeting. He said "Do you have a Plan B?"

The EU is going to crush you, starting by attacking your banking system."

He told me of his shock as a young activist, in the wake of the Labour Party's 1974 election victory on a radical programme. The British banking system was immediately attacked, forcing the UK to appeal to the IMF to request a loan, in exchange for implementing austerity policies. He wanted me to reassure him that we had a plan B. I was in the minority of the Syriza leadership so could only tell him that he had to discuss it with Tsipras, to try to convince him.

This anecdote shows that he has no illusions in the EU. It's just that the Labour Party machine and its MPs are fiercely hostile to him. And they are now blaming him for having offered a minimum-service Remain campaign. The same media who themselves called for a Remain vote want him out, even though Brexit won, on the grounds that he didn't do enough...

Are you surprised by this result?

No. What struck me during this campaign was the impression of déjà-vu. I was lucky enough to live in France during the 2005 referendum on the European Constitution, in Greece during last year's referendum on Juncker's austerity plan, and this year's vote in Britain. On each occasion those who defended the EU brought along less and less positive discourse and essentially employed arguments founded on intimidation and fear, putting into the spotlight all the ills that would come down on the United Kingdom in the British voted the wrong way.

As usual Schäuble and Juncker made threats and even Obama played his part in explaining what a catastrophe Brexit would be. In France we focused a lot on the fact that the pro-Brexit campaign was driven by unsavoury figures — as indeed they are — from Boris Johnson to Nigel Farage. But the media less underlined the fact that 'Remain' was supported by the whole self-contented establishment — the arrogant City of London in the front rank — and that this itself had something to do with driving the popular electorate's refusal.

Do you still think there could be a democratic reformation of Europe, such as many people now want in the wake of Brexit?

Increasingly left-wing forces understand that the EU cannot be reformed in a progressive direction, with a more democratic mode of functioning, because its very architecture is designed not to be reformable. Everything is under lock and key — and having taught in a European Studies department, I can assure you my specialist colleagues are aware of this. The EU was not conceived to work using the rules of parliamentary democracy, whose "populist" temptations it always feared.

The British vote is thus an opportunity worth seizing for all those who have been thinking about a plan B, and who are conscious that real alternatives require a break with the EU. From Jean-Luc Mélenchon in France to Oskar Lafontaine and Sahra Wagenknecht in Germany, the left wing of Podemos or those who left Syriza last year: all these anti-neoliberal and progressive forces must seize hold of this moment, if they do not want to be seriously punished by a nationalist and xenophobic right capturing the popular anger.

But the Left forces that broke with Tsipras in Greece seem rather lifeless...

The recent Pew Institute study on Europhilia — surveying a very wide sample of Europe's populations — has shown that over 71% of Greeks no longer accept the EU and that a full third of them want to leave the Eurozone. Certainly the Greek political field is blocked and following Tsipras's capitulation last summer the feeling of defeat and demoralisation remains a strong one. But we have started seeing movements to the Left of Syriza gaining ground, be that Popular Unity or the movement launched by Zoe Konstantopoulou. We are on the eve of important realignments on the European scale, and are faced with a radicalisation of either a left-wing and internationalist or right-wing and xenophobic character. If the Left that says it is hostile to neoliberalism continues to repeat the litany of slogans about "social Europe" and the "reform of European institutions," it will not simply reduce itself to impotence, but will be entirely swept away.

Did the way Greece was treated last summer play a role in the British vote?

Nigel Farage, leader of the nationalist and xenophobic UKIP, made interventions in the European Parliament in

which he accused the EU of behaving in a dictatorial manner toward Greece. He said things that the whole British and European Left should have said. The British referendum is just a fresh sign of the rejection of the EU. The voters understand that it is at the heart of the problem of today's representative politics, namely the problem of a pro-EU elite contemptuous of popular layers and the very notion of popular sovereignty. The European project was tolerated passively while the economic situation seemed fluid, but it fell apart when the economy deteriorated and the straitjacket of austerity policies hardened everywhere, under the EU authorities' impulse and niggling control.

The spatial division of the British vote is striking. Here we are dealing with two different countries. The bubble of the City and the South East faces another country — one which we never discuss, because we prefer to talk about trendy and multi-cultural London. Before I taught in London I was working in a university in a town near Birmingham, Wolverhampton. There was an enormous gulf between them. The town centre was ruined. In the England where the industrial revolution began, everyone feels abandoned and condemned to social and economic death. The Labour Party has abandoned whole populations to their fate and thus left the field open to parties like UKIP.

This is paradoxical because while in France the Front National has always succeeded in taking on a vocabulary and an image that could "give it the common touch," UKIP initially embodied everything the British working classes always mocked: the aging, Church of England, traditionalist, repressed, 100% white middle classes... in sum, grandad's conservatism. Imagine the anger and feeling of abandonment that it took for such a party nonetheless to succeed in capturing the working classes' vote.

What position would you take on the prospect of fresh EU-membership referendums in other European countries?

The EU cannot be reformed and I think there is no other solution but to dissolve it. A true refoundation of Europe would mean breaking the iron cage of perpetual austerity and authoritarian neoliberalism. To get there we need a rupture with the institutional machinery of the EU. So we have to play the referendum game, while blocking the forces of the xenophobic and nationalist Right from winning hegemony and diverting the popular revolt. The far Left has been slow. But without a break from the EU it can no longer think of changing the power relations within a machine specially conceived to prevent any divergence, faced with a bulldozer that we already saw crushing Greece.