

Ones size doesn't fit all

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I was glad for the sensible election results in Greece last Sunday, when the left wing Syriza-party and its young leader and new Prime Minister Alexis Tsipras came out as clear winners, with other parties getting their votes, as it should be in the oldest democracy. I am glad that Syriza didn't quite get outright majority because then they might have had to implement all of what they promised in the election campaign; and not all can have been well founded, sometimes just based on populist sentiments and anger against all those European Union (EU) austerity measures that have landed a quarter of the Greek unemployed living on reduced allowances, government employees sacked from what they thought would be life-time jobs, many living below the poverty line, and the youth seeing a gloomy future.

It is indeed a problem for the traditional economists in Greece, Germany, the International Monetary Fund and other pillars of society that the austerity measures would have relegated Greece to second-class citizens within the EU and the Euro currency zone, without any real possibility to recover any time soon. The EU lacks realistic, expecting one economic size and theory to fit all, based on German mentality.

No, I don't think that the German Chancellor Angela Merkel and Finance Minister Wolfgang Schaeuble, the main architects behind the EU austerity measures, had any bad will. Yet, they also acted in own interest, before and after the Greek and other EU members lived beyond their means. Yes, when they perhaps bought too many Merced Benz, even on borrowed money (which benefited Germany export), gave its citizens generous pensions and other benefits, as all countries should - hoping for lasting growth in the economy. But there should have been mechanisms in place within the EU to regulate public and private actions within member countries *before* they defaulted. It is wrong to blame it on Greece alone.

When countries land into financial difficulties, such as Ireland, Greece, Spain, Portugal, Italy, and also France, then there should be positive and realistic measures to help them get out of the difficulties; to demand that they tighten their belts, reduce the government sector and welfare services, and all these crude actions, is drawing board and right-wing measures, something that economists and conservative politicians seem to like, well, nowadays also 'responsible' social democrats. But serious politicians must consider the affect of policies on the people they are to serve; they must remember that all economic measures should in the end benefit the people, not the other way around.

Ireland was the first EU victim of the financial and economic crisis in 2008. When it was forced under the EU thumb and had to agree to austerity measures, an Irish friend of mine who worked in a senior post in the United Nations dealing with human rights issues, said she was against Ireland given in to the EU pressure. She had rather wanted Ireland to default and not service its debt. That time, I wondered if she wasn't a bit unrealistic and irresponsible. Now, I think she was right.

Iceland, a tiny northern European country which is not an EU member, did not succumb to the demands by the private banks and foreign governments when their financial institutions and economy went over the cliff, about the same time as Ireland's. They tailored their own, realistic response to how to restructure their economy and service their debt. Iceland's recovery has been remarkable, unlike anything

the EU has been able to do for Greece. If Iceland had not thought and acted independently, they would have been doomed to misery and slight prospects for recovery within the next half a century.

The Icelanders are a mixture of level-headed Scandinavians and risk-takers, as seamen, fishermen, and farmers on a volcanic island in a harsh climate must be. The 330,000 Icelanders make the best out of their natural resources, which are in abundance, but must be tamed - by common sense, science, and technology. Some Icelanders dreamt of 'work-free' and 'resource-free' profits through banking and finance and they fell badly on their face. Like the Viking descendants in Iceland, the 'Celtic tigers' in Ireland may have a streak of recklessness too, and still they lay their trust in God's hands, and I even think the Icelanders do, unlike what people think. After all, three-quarters of the Icelanders are members of the Protestant-Lutheran Church.

What about the Greeks then? They are not like the logical and practical Swedes, and defiantly not like the systematic Germans, who only take risks within calculated rules and regulations, and they are made to suit their own interests. The Americans are much the same; they, too, make all rules of the economic game to fit themselves. Why else would they do as well?

We don't all want to become Germans and Americans. We want to be ourselves and different. Some want to be Mediterranean, like the Greeks, perhaps less systematic, but more social, philosophical and human. We don't all want to fit into the same A-4 format, a single economic, political and administrative model and ideology. We want pluralism and diversity, and we want to learn from each other to create better societies and countries. Yes, we also want to learn from the stringent German and American ways. But we don't want them to lead us. Besides, that model is based on winners and losers, within the EU and its backyard to the east and south; and within America and its backyard, which is pretty much the rest of the world.

In hindsight, I wonder why the EU created the Euro currency in 1999; it seems it was done hastily and with scant financial and political homework and preparation. It was perhaps also based on wishes for establishing an alternative international currency to the US dollar. Had the EU waited and prepared themselves well at the central level and in each member country, the Euro might well have succeeded, as it also did to begin with. Now, indeed after the Greek election, the Euro is in serious difficulties. It may be that some of the 19 countries in the Euro zone will pull out, if they can, and potential new members will think more than twice before joining.

Now, a few days after the Greek elections and the reality shock of the European Union with 28 members, the degree of the *democratic mindset* of the European countries, indeed Germany and the other larger countries, will be tested. It is time for the EU bureaucrats, technocrats and economists to re-visit their theories and practices. It is time for the politicians to hold more than a few meetings and discussions, and even read a few books, not only about mainstream ideas, but also about alternatives. The great ancient philosophers were Greek. Maybe the Greeks will again teach us some lessons?

As a Norwegian I am glad that Norway never joined EU, and certainly not the Euro zone. But at the same time, I am for deep contact and cooperation between all countries, and groups of countries; it is 'take and give'. Yet, it must be on a level playing field, where all are equal. There is never one size that fits all. There are many theories, political and economic systems, ways and forms to live a good life in our great world. Good luck, Greece!

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