On the UK Referendum

written by Jane Cowan
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For me, the UK referendum story began a year ago with another referendum: that of Greece. Elected in January 2015 on a promise to end austerity, throughout the spring the SYRIZA government was pressured by the Troika (the EU, the European Central Bank and the IMF) to accept ever harsher and ill-targeted cuts to public spending in exchange for the next bailout. Pushed to the limit, Prime Minister Alexis Tsipras walked out of negotiations and called a referendum, declaring that Greeks must decide whether they were willing to accept the 'impossible' terms he had been offered.

In cafes, in kitchens, standing in queues for the ATM to withdraw their daily maximum of 50 euros cash, Greeks debated: 'yes' or 'no'?

As the days passed, the question to which these were possible answers became less clear; a desperate 'yes' campaign claimed it was about choosing to stay in 'Europe' rather than simply the Eurozone, while several European finance ministers threatened that a 'no' would provoke Greece's eviction: Grexit. On referendum day (5th July 2015), Greeks responded defiantly to this attempted blackmail: 62% voted 'No!' and for a week, euphoria reigned. Then, in a tumultuous 24-hour negotiation, Tsipras was 'waterboarded' into accepting a deal even worse than the one his fellow citizens had rejected. Refusal, he judged, was politically impossible: Greeks feel European and at the time, over 80% supported EU membership, whatever the price.

The lesson I took from that scenario was that European finance ministers were all too willing to jettison 'solidarity' and push Greece to the wall with austerity policies that everybody knew from the start simply do not work. Neoliberalism easily trumped Social Europe; SYRIZA's alternative path would not be tolerated. The other component of the so-called 'Greek crisis' has been, in the words of Dimitris Christopoulos, a 'reception crisis' for Europe, not a 'refugee crisis'. With a few honourable exceptions, EU member governments have preferred to keep refugees out, or keep them corralled in Greece and Italy, rather than to offer them hospitality.

I'm hardly starry-eyed about the EU. It badly needs reform.

But I have been persuaded that the 'critical in' position of much of the European Left, advocating for a People's Europe and mobilizing for democratic reform from below, is our best hope. Clearly, the hunger for democracy and the desire to be listened to is widespread in the UK, as elsewhere. The UK referendum tapped into these sentiments, though not always in the ways I would have wished. I started noticing in the final days of the campaign how much Brexit leaders like Boris

Johnson talked about 'democracy', and indeed, the 'taking back control' wasn't (as I'd first assumed) about–or not only about–'control of borders'; it was also about 'control of our own affairs', 'democratic control'. Such a clever move: to capture for the Brexit side the hurrah-word 'democracy', a word that holds real attraction for people who have been abandoned. Only...they are now going to be even more abandoned by those they have voted to lead them.

I watch, impressed and disturbed, as 'democracy' is appropriated for profoundly undemocratic ends.