

## Report #1 from Athens

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IDEAS

OP-ED

by Gary Zabel (Advocate)

I'm in Athens alone. I don't know anyone in the city and the people I do know are two hours away. I won't see them for another day. It's strange observing people whose language you don't speak. Every Greek I've asked, "Do you speak English" has replied "Yes" with a big smile on his or her face. But very few do. So communication is filled with awkward moments when we fail to understand one another. But you can learn a lot about people even when you don't share their language: facial expressions, voice intonation, the kinds of things they do. What I've learned so far is that Greece is in a depression but the people are not. I'm sitting in a huge park peppered with bars under awnings, and places for teenagers to meet and younger kids to play. Almost everyone is in a group of some sort. The park is in a working-class neighborhood. If statistics mean anything, at least 1/4 of the adults here who want jobs cannot find them. That's equivalent to US unemployment at the height of the Great Depression. Not everyone is smiling but most people are. Older kids are playing soccer and chasing one another, while the younger ones climb on slides and monkey bars. Occasionally an infant screams from some unknown dissatisfaction. Teenagers are congregating in mixed groups of boys and girls, and spending much of their time joking. The adults are somewhat more sedate, but they are talking with one another or watching over young children. Some are drinking, sociably. The old saying is true: you don't have to be rich to be happy. It costs nothing to come to the park to play or meet with friends. The loudest sounds are of children laughing.

I don't mean to understate the difficulties working-class Greeks have faced over the past five years. There are undoubtedly anxieties hidden from me. And surely there are poorer neighborhoods than the one I am in. Extreme poverty is debilitating. But, from what I can see, this is not a defeated people. I have none of the sense of world-weariness that I have when in London. It's easy to forget that most Greeks have always been poor. They were poor when they invented Western philosophy, historiography, and theatre. The reason is obvious from the air. Wherever you look out of the window of a plane, the land appears parched. From the ground you can see that, even when relatively abundant, the trees are small. There are hills and mountains everywhere. Much of the soil is the result of volcanic activity, and whatever nutrients it once possessed have been leached by millennia of wind and rain from the sea. Even on the mainland, let alone the islands, the Greeks are never far from the ocean. In addition, Greece has very few natural resources. It's not possible to sustain an economy on olives. The biggest industries are tourism and shipping. The latter was a preoccupation of the Greeks in the days of Socrates.

Today parliament voted to support what the press is widely reporting as Tsipris' capitulation to the Troika. I don't know what to think about the austerity plan he recently submitted to the "creditors." The amazing fact, though, is that he spoke no bullshit in parliament. He said very straightforwardly that the government had been forced to accept several measures that violated Syriza's program, but that it was necessary to do so. The reason he says is that the overwhelming vote in the referendum against the Troika's last proposal was a vote to strengthen the government's negotiating position, not a vote to leave the euro. He is right about that, even though some have argued that the Greek population was rapidly moving to left. Even so, Tsipris intends to trade the harsh measures he's accepted for a much bigger loan than was last on the table, and over a three-year rather than one-year period. He has also demanded debt "restructuring," but has been careful to say nothing about loan forgiveness - the so-called "haircut" that sends even the self-possessed Merkel into a fit. It's not at all certain that Germany, Greece's largest creditor will accept any of this. Yanis Varoufakis, the recently retired and controversial finance minister, published an article in the Guardian claiming that Germany wants Greece out of the euro as a lesson to France. We shall see. Is this part of Tsipri's strategy - to build majority support for more radical measures when Germany rejects the proposal? The so-called "far left" in Syriza and the Communist Party want immediate Grexit. (It's amusing to watch the papers trying to draw a distinction between the "radical left" - i.e. Syriza - and the "far left" within it.) But as of now there is no majority support for leaving the euro. Even the members of Parliament in Syriza's left wing simply

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abstained from the vote. Only the communist MPs and those from the neo-Nazi Golden Dawn voted against the proposal. But it's Tsipri's forthrightness that impresses me at the moment. A head of state who speaks the truth. What will they think of next?

*Longtime Open Media Boston contributor Gary Zabel is a professor of philosophy at UMass Boston - and most recently, the director of the division of political economy of the new online international graduate college The Global Center for Advanced Studies. He is visiting Greece for the college's founding conference, Democracy Rising, and will be sending a series of reports about his trip in his role as Our Man in Athens.*


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