

Can Greens be part of a broad Anti-Austerity Front in Europe?

On 20 March, the UK think tank Green House and the Green European Foundation, with the support of the Belgian think tank Oikos, held a discussion event in London with the title '**Green growth or de-growth? Alternatives to austerity in Europe**'. The event was hosted by Jean Lambert, London's Green Party MEP, and funded by the Green European Foundation. Over 30 people took part in a lively debate around the different political responses across Europe to the ongoing austerity agenda, and the prospects for a Green response to this agenda that might connect with the growing popular discontent it is now provoking.

A panel of five speakers in London - *Dirk Holemans* (Director, Think Tank Oikos, Belgium), *Tomislav Tomasevic* (Heinrich Boell Foundation, Zagreb) and *John Blewitt* and *Jonathan Essex* (both Green House), plus Chair *Aurélie Maréchal* (Director, Green European Foundation) - was joined in a live video link from Greece by *Giorgos Kallis* (ICREA, Barcelona). In a first round of scene-setting, the panel members outlined key elements of what they thought the Green response to austerity policy ought to be in their own country and region. All quickly agreed that current governmental policy in Europe was focused solely on growth, though with national variations with respect to speed, fiscal strategy and focus. Whatever those variations, austerity was being presented as only a temporary necessary evil to enable a return to (a more secure) economic growth. With the notable exception of the German government's inquiry commission into growth and prosperity, there was no discussion at national or European level of a post-growth or degrowth alternative, though there were some concessions towards 'green growth'.

The fundamental reason for this was the almost universal acceptance in government and the mainstream media of the primacy of debt reduction and the consolidation of public finances as the overriding political goal. The Keynesian stimulus policies that had been widely adopted in the first period following the crash were no longer being seriously pursued anywhere. Added to this was the equally widespread assumption that degrowth, or economic contraction – whether planned or as a consequence of recession – was a 'job-killer'. To counter this, Greens would have to propose a de-coupling of employment creation and of social security funding from growth. One element of such a de-coupling programme might be a reduction in working hours; another could be a Citizens' Basic Income; and a third, a major overhaul of the tax base, away from labour and income and on to consumption and ecological bads. But this amounted to a radical and complex set of policies which Greens were not in a position to get adopted anywhere in Europe in the short to medium term, and one which moreover would be a very hard political sell at the best of times – which this is not. (A more detailed list of 'Green alternatives to austerity' is provided in Giorgos Kallis' recent article in the Green European Journal – see <http://www.greeneuropeanjournal.eu/can-we-prosper-without-growth-10-policy-proposals-for-the-new-left-and-the-green-parties/>)

The one ray of hope in the current landscape was the gradual but now increasingly visible rise of more innovative economic ideas at a sub-national level – at regional and more especially at city level, and below or beyond that at the level of civil society and citizens' initiatives. Here, individuals and groups were experimenting increasingly with new economic forms and logic, such as open source and sharing economy models, and were forming local, regional and even international networks to help develop these. At the citizens' level the key term here is autonomy. Dirk Holemans described this as 'a social movement that doesn't yet know it exists'. And the internet means that local initiatives can immediately transcend their origins and become international. One step up, at city level, it was worth noting that international innovation networks of cities such as ICLEI or the C40 Cities Climate

Leadership Group now potentially represent populations larger than those of many countries. Is it possible, he suggested, that the progressive force for the 21st century, following the trade unions in the 19th, might be city unions?

The panellists' presentations provoked a round of responses and questions from the audience, ranging from detailed issues of fiscal policy to the role of money creation and whether the EU is currently the biggest obstacle to greater equality. On this last question, there was broad agreement on the panel that although the EU is, on balance, currently part of the constellation of forces driving greater inequality, it is not itself the root of the problem, and indeed has the capacity to be part of the solution. On other issues there was less consensus, and some clear disagreement on short-term and longer-term political strategies for European Green parties. Should their focus be national or international? Incremental and pragmatic, or ambitious and radical - even Utopian? This led us back to one of the framing questions for the event, now re-phrased in the course of the discussion as 'Can the Greens be populist? Can they learn from Syriza and Podemos?' Views on this were not unanimous, and Giorgos Kallis pointed out that in fact the Greek Greens, too, had split along three different lines around this issue. The majority view that emerged was that Greens could not afford to chase electoral popularity or court broader alliances on the basis of resistance to austerity alone. The non-Green anti-austerity movement remains broadly 'productivist' and in favour of growth as conventionally defined, and is therefore not capable of helping national governments and populations escape from the current set of fundamental problems of which austerity is just the most immediate symptom. Green alternatives to austerity are the right ones in the longer term, and Greens must remain truthful and clear-sighted in continuing to promote them.

Let me finish with a subjective assessment and interpretation of the event. Perhaps the clearest benefit of an event such as this is that of hearing views from across the continent on a fundamental problem that is shared by all the member states, albeit with local differences of emphasis and context. This escape beyond our own limited horizons is extremely useful in enabling us to identify and analyse the essential features of any problem. But despite this our group clearly had some difficulty in arriving at a common understanding and position. And it seemed to me that the explanation for this may lie in the terms in which the issues are framed. Austerity policy, as Tomislav Tomasevic put it, is a means to an end, and that end is a return to growth; and Greens – unlike many others who object to austerity policy – object not only to the means but to the end. (In fact, in eastern Europe, 'austerity policy' is hardly on the agenda - which paradoxically makes the fundamental choice between green and non-green economic futures all the clearer. The choice there is between a moderated and directed 'green growth' and the kind of turbo-charged neoliberal extremism that produces the current government proposals in Croatia to hand over the construction and running of the motorways to a PFI project driven by Goldman Sachs et al which will bind Croatia to an increase in motorway traffic of 1.5% per year for the next 40 years!)

So we have to keep in mind what is meant by the central term in this debate. Greens are against austerity policy, but they are also against the productivist economic system to which all the other parties wish to return – the end to which austerity is a misconceived means. To allow ourselves to be drawn into a narrow focus on the means – or worse, to be seduced into alliances based on a shared objection to the instrumental measures because of a hope of short-term electoral gains – is to lose sight of the bigger picture. The populist anti-austerity movements currently drawing votes away from the austerity parties have no long-term answer to the root causes of our economic and political malaise in Europe. They offer only the feel-good factor of immediate rejection and righteous anger, but not the hard work and clear thinking required for long-term transformation. What appears to be common ground can sometimes in reality be no more than a common starting point – a point of

departure, after which our chosen paths would start to diverge immediately. The Greens do have a real alternative to austerity, which is based on a reframing of the fundamental relationship between human society and the planet, and especially on a rejection of the harmful fixation with material growth; and it distracts us from that larger task, and risks our losing credibility as a unique political movement, if we succumb to the temptation to enter into alliances which can at best achieve only the very first step on that longer journey, that of stopping further cuts to public services (though admittedly, even that is sometimes tempting), before inevitably breaking apart again.

In summary:

- Greens have a real alternative to austerity, and it differs from that of the populist anti-austerity movements which have their roots (mainly) in a socialist rather than a green ideology.
- Like some of those other anti-austerity movements, Greens reject the exaggerated fear of public debt. At present, public debt is treated like some kind of mythical monster, a Minotaur to which our public services must be sacrificed for its appeasement. However, most of the other anti-austerity movements just want to keep it at bay for longer until we return to growth, when supposedly we can afford to *continue* feeding it our young, our future. Greens would start by cutting the monster down to size: by first conducting an audit of the debt to establish the extent to which it has a genuine claim on us as taxpayers, or whether much of it – owned by the reckless banks and by exploitative speculators – can be considered as having only a limited legitimate claim on the public purse, or can even be regarded as ‘odious’ and illegitimate (see Molly Scott Cato’s chapter on this issue in the Green House book ‘The Post-Growth Project’).
- Once the monster has been cut down to size, and we can see it for what it is, then rather than continuing to destroy our public realm in desperate pursuit of an impossible return to growth, the Green alternative to austerity involves a return to a wider conception of the public realm: fewer narrowly-conceived ‘jobs’ in parasitic or materially damaging industries, but more real work in transitioning to a sustainable economic and social system, resulting in a much wider and fairer distribution of real prosperity. Such a distribution would have the added benefit of providing more tax revenue, and this combined with sensible cuts to harmful expenditure (e.g. fossil fuel subsidies, subsidies to big business, nuclear weapons) would kill off the shrunken monster.

I would argue that the temptation towards anti-austerity coalitions is already watering down our unique (and uniquely *correct*) political position. In the recent television ‘Leaders’ debates’ in the UK in the run-up to the imminent elections here, Natalie Bennett did a more than creditable job in presenting the argument for why austerity is not only morally wrong but economically misconceived - as did her party leader colleagues from the Scottish National Party and Plaid Cymru (the Welsh nationalists). And of course it was wonderful to see the three women ganging up on the blustering male proponents of continued austerity, of continued cuts for the poor, and the photos of the three of them embracing afterwards. * But it seemed to some of us that she failed to draw a firm line separating Greens from the others, to make clear that Green anti-austerity derives from a different starting-point; and as a result the Green programme came across as just another one on the spectrum to the left of centrist social democracy - perhaps a little greener than the others, but essentially the same. And if Green politics can be consigned to that position and role, then it will have failed in its unique historic mission.

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*The Guardian's art correspondent Jonathan Jones wrote an illuminating article on the iconography of the televised debate, using art historical analysis to make the same point as I do here: see <http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2015/apr/17/tv-election-debate-new-british-politics-image>