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Clashing cultures: lessons from an erratic Marxist

The economic crisis gripping Greece has thrown new characters onto the international stage and, in reviving some old economic debates, has introduced some new ways of thinking. Jonathan Ives reflects on what Greek finance minister Yanis Varoufakis has to say about workwear, Marx and the role of culture in modern society.

Culture can be a difficult thing to define but it is perhaps one of those things that you know when you see it. Step forward Greek finance minister, Yanis Varoufakis, who first arrived in the UK some months ago to talk economics with the representative of Her Majesty's Government, a certain Mr G Osborne, then, as now, chancellor of the exchequer.

Having stood on the step of Number 11 with the chancellor to allow the photographers do their job, Varoufakis accompanied Osborne inside to discuss the approach – refreshing or radical depending on your perspective – of the Syriza government, then newly elected in Greece. Before they had settled into their chairs the UK media was already passing comment on the Greek minister's attire; and, as so often in the UK media, the comment was rather cutting, including some sneering, a little giggling and no little patronising sanctimony.

The issue seemed to be that Varoufakis had arrived dressed for work in a modern business environment. His attire – a dark jacket over a shirt worn without a tie, dark black jeans, black shoes, a black top coat in the style of a Barbour – would not look out of place in the vast majority of office environments around Europe but it contrasted starkly with George Osborne's approach, which was to be darkly suited, carefully coiffured and stubbornly in step with the sartorial demands of Westminster.

More telling than the choice of whether to wear the shirt inside or outside the belt (Varoufakis went with outside, George's shirt stayed neatly tucked in), was the demeanour of both. In the already celebrated photograph Osborne is smiling with the practised nonchalance that makes him look uncomfortable. His arms hang oddly forward from shoulders, leaving his hands adrift in front of his hips. His feet are oddly placed, suggesting he is not balanced in his stance and certainly not comfortable. Even though he is standing on his own doorstep with the might of Her Majesty's government behind him and all the advantages that British wealth and privilege can provide, he still looks slightly unsettled.

In contrast Varoufakis is standing naturally, his hands comfortably in the pockets of his overcoat and smiling in the manner of someone who has just paused for a moment on his way into a meeting. He resembles a great many people going to work anywhere but he also looks as though he comes from a different world to the colleague next to him and certainly as though he is in a different business.

Which of course he is. Osborne is styled in the age-old manner of a British patrician politician going about his task of telling people why they need to do what he is about to tell them to do but his eyes and his stance suggest he is just beginning to be aware of the cultural dissonance visited upon his own front step. Varoufakis has the demeanour of a man who has arrived to listen politely and expects to

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leave unswayed. He does not appear to be awed by his environment and he is certainly not intimidated.

This tableau illustrates different cultures but also a new dynamic. One of these men is trying to persuade and impress the other, and, unusually for a scene in British politics and perhaps significantly for European politics, this time it is the bloke in the suit.

As part of the 'what we've been reading' column in the TLR premium edition [sign up now to support your local leisure editorial team] you may have seen a link to the Yanis Varoufakis article titled, 'How I became an erratic Marxist.' There are a number of aspects of the piece (which was originally drafted as a lecture in 2013) that make it fascinating but it is particularly interesting for what it implies about culture.

After the banking crisis became all too apparent one learned talking head offered the devastating news that "We're all Keynesians now". It was a jarring statement, not least because no one in mainstream British politics, including anyone within the Labour party, had dared mention John Maynard Keynes for best part of half a century. But if it was jarring it was also wide of the mark: "We're all Marxists now" would have been more apposite.

However, even after an epoch-defining banking crash, finding a senior politician, albeit one from overseas, in the British press discussing and explaining his relationship with, affection for and critical assessment of Marxism counts as one of the most surprising outcomes of the whole economic meltdown. If nothing else, the rise of the anti-austerity Syriza party in Greece brought new parameters to the political discourse. As well as a new language, prime minister Alexis Tsipras and finance minister Yanis Varoufakis brought a new approach to politics, an approach that may be refreshing for a tired voter looking for new inspiration and is probably terrifying for a tired politician doing well out of the status quo.

Varoufakis's article is fascinating on a number of fronts. First, it marks a re-emergence of Marx as part of the economic and political debate. Just the utterance of the name suggests that alternatives to the neo-liberal hegemony might be possible and that such concepts are not confined to (and dismissed as) radicals and the 'loony left'. Second, such articles elevate the debate and raise expectations. Could anyone seriously imagine George Osborne writing a similar discussion of the neo-liberal economic experiment or offering a critique of the strengths and weaknesses of Adam Smith; or even getting someone to write it for him? Third, Varoufakis emphasises the humanity behind the numbers, framing the economic discourse in terms of the people that make up the collective experience.

It is this last point that resonates with our cultural perspective. It's about the people, stupid. By couching everything in the remote terms of economics and financial data, the people get lost – we get lost – and subsumed, dehumanised for the convenience of politicians. As Varoufakis explains, "Marx created a narrative populated by workers, capitalists, officials and scientists who were history's dramatis personae." This cast plays out in the context of a dialectic in which everything – wealth and poverty, debt and savings, labour and capital – has its opposite and in which human capital – the 'human resource' – cannot be reduced to a simple quantity: "If capital ever succeeds in quantifying, and subsequently fully commodifying, labour, as it is constantly trying to, it will also squeeze that indeterminate, recalcitrant human freedom from within labour that allows for the generation of value."

In this human value lies culture: the activities, the connections and the

unpredictable inclinations of people, of everyone. It is why architecture and town planning are such uncertain arts, why sport, leisure and culture is such an imprecise pursuit, and why so many politicians are so much more comfortable talking in terms of economics than in terms of people.

We may not all be Marxists these days but Yanis Varoufakis reminds us that we are all people and perhaps we deserve better.

Jonathan Ives is the editor of the Leisure Review.

This article is based on several pieces that first appeared in the premium edition of the Leisure Review. The premium edition is available to all premium subscribers to the Leisure Review and you can add your name to the list by signing up for a very reasonable consideration. Full details via www.theleisurereview.co.uk/subscribe.

A link to Mr Varoufakis's article is available below and was included in the What We've Been Reading column of the TLR premium edition.

HOW I BECAME AN ERRATIC MARXIST

Article. Greek finance minister Yanis Varoufakis explains why the wealth creators are the people who create culture, rather than the wealthy who own, run and profit from big business.

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