THE DECLINE OF GREECE'S SYRIZA
Moderation, Factionalism, Oligarchization, and Weak Popular Counterpower

John Brown

ABSTRACT Mass antineoliberal protests in Greece that challenged the long-standing two-party system and austerity policies associated with both major parties (PASOK and New Democracy) were followed by the emergence of challenger party Syriza. Data gathered during interviews with figures from Syriza as well as other leftist parties and activists highlight, however, that the outsider-to-insider party-building process culminated in a delegitimized and fragile Syriza. The electoral strategy of Syriza leaders in conjunction with opposition pressures encouraged a moderation of the party's brand. To pursue such moderation required insulating the leadership clique from radical voices via degenerative factionalism and oligarchization processes. Moreover, weak popular sector organizations were unable to counter the moderation-factionalism-oligarchization process. The culmination of the party-building process saw a Syriza that lacked a coherent brand or any societal connections, leaving it vulnerable to replacement in the party system.

KEYWORDS Syriza, Left populism, movement-party, antineoliberal, Greece

Introduction

In the Andean region of South America in the 1990s and 2000s and in Southern Europe in the 2010s, where financial crises were followed by austerity and where traditional labor-based parties programmatically converged with their center-right rivals by imposing neoliberal adjustment programs, mass social and electoral protests paved the way for the emergence of varying types of outsider-left parties and leaders. Their emergence in countries such as Bolivia, Ecuador, Venezuela, Spain, and Greece had a dramatic impact on party systems and on politics more generally. Despite promises from party leaderships to transcend neoliberalism and to build radically democratic parties, in all cases, to varying degrees, leaderships backtracked on promises as the party moved closer to governing.

Indeed, in the current conjuncture, the outsider-left parties face—in particular in the European context—existential crises. Brand-diluted parties headed by leadership cliques with weak connections to society have emerged—hardly a response to the very crisis of democracy in the neoliberal era that opened space for the emergence of the outsiders in the first place. While earlier mass parties could rely on the support of labor for survival even if they failed to become electoral majorities, the same is not true for emerging challenger parties, which may cease to exist altogether. Moreover, it is possible that the party-building process absorbs and disperses movement energies that were apparent at the moment of the party's

emergence, as well as the very belief that an alternative to the status quo may be achieved via electoral participation. In such scenarios, not only will the original outsider risk disappearance, but where a more radical faction splits from the outsider calling for a retaking of antineoliberal positions, they will do so from a very challenging position. As such, gaining insight into the origins, trajectories, and legacies of such party-building processes is crucial in the current conjuncture of democratic discontent, which has witnessed surging support for far-right forces.

The focus in this article is on the Syriza party in Greece as it is a key case for gaining insight into the challenges of building a radical outsider-left party in Europe and beyond. Syriza was the only European antineoliberal party to win office as the major governing party; it emerged with linkages to extraparliamentary organizations that had helped coordinate mass antineoliberal protests; as it moved toward office it confronted powerful pro-neoliberal forces; party leaders felt pressured to moderate the radical party brand, in turn triggering internal party tensions as well as party-movement tensions; the party witnessed a dramatic rise in support before rapidly losing legitimacy among the Greek Left and the wider electorate; the traditional social democratic party, PASOK, sought to reclaim Syriza's space in the party system as the principal opposition to the right-wing New Democracy; while small parties forged from factional splits from Syriza attempted to pick up the pieces following a turbulent decade between 2015 and 2025. In short, the Syriza case demonstrates all the major challenges confronting existing radical outsider-left parties in the contemporary era—in Europe and the Americas—as well as offering insights for future leftist party-building strategies in the current moment.

The convergence of Greece's mainstream parties—Panhellenic Socialist Movement (PASOK) and New Democracy (ND)—in the 2010s around acceptance of a harsh bailout and austerity dealigned the old two-party system as a new bailout/antibailout cleavage emerged. The narrowing of democratic quality (in socioeconomic terms) accompanied by the shallowing of democratic quality (convergence of mainstream parties around neoliberal austerity, transnational influence over domestic policymakers, technocratic decision-making) fostered a crisis of representation and a crisis of legitimation within the Greek political system, which opened space for outsider, antisystem parties to capitalize on discontent (Brown 2020; Hopkin 2020; Katsambekis 2019). The adoption of externally imposed austerity measures by the Troika[1] fostered mass mobilizations between 2010 and 2015 (Kriesi and Hutter 2018). The Greek protesters vehemently opposed neoliberalism, called for national economic sovereignty and more direct forms of democratic participation embodying a break from the political establishment (Ferrero, Centeno, and Roumpakis 2022).

Syriza openly supported the antineoliberal protests from the outset, the only parliamentary party to do so. Since PASOK, the traditional social democratic party, had to implement most of the austerity measures, it alienated its voters, opening space to the party's left for the outsider party Syriza to gain ground with

the working class, the precarious and unemployed, pensioners, and the squeezed lower middle class by espousing an antibailout, antiausterity rhetoric and promises to break with the old way of doing politics (Altiparmakis 2018).

Following the 2012 elections, Syriza became the leading opposition party and continued to build its brand around an antineoliberal, antiausterity stance coupled with promises to deepen the quality of democracy and to move beyond the old two-party system. When in parliament as opposition, Syriza raised issues discussed by movements on the streets concerning labor rights, cuts in social spending, and political corruption while continuing to oppose the Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) signed with the Troika and how it was adopted via the pressures of unelected transnational forces. Tax increases for big business, social control of the banking sector, a moratorium on debt repayment, universal access to social welfare, and an end to salary cuts were core elements of the socioeconomic programs advanced by Syriza as it sought to establish its party brand and offer a clearly distinctive electoral option from the other large parties. The brand building of the party while in opposition culminated in the 2014 Program of Thessaloniki built on the rejection of neoliberalism and the preexisting party system, turning attention toward a possible alternative future path for Greece that would benefit the majority "have-nots" and force the "haves" to pay their fair share (Katsambekis 2019: 34).

Syriza saw its role in this moment as being a unifying agent to help coordinate a movement of resistance comprised of various victims of the crisis. Many activists entered the party and ran on Syriza ballots in the 2012, 2014, and 2015 elections (Papanikolopoulos and Rongas 2019). This dual membership role allowed for connections to be forged between conventional and contentious politics. Syriza members who participated in movement organizations were to bring the party closer to the real demands and concerns of the people, and, having identified with these movements, represent their concerns via the institutions of the state (Katsambekis 2019: 26). Syriza's branding and strategy of working with extraparliamentary movement organizations proved successful, as the party won the 2015 elections with 36 percent of the vote.

Since its 2015 electoral victory, however, Syriza's fortunes have been in decline. It was trounced in elections in 2019 and 2023 by conservative ND; the party lost members and cadres as well as large sectors of its Youth branch; Syriza's claiming of PASOK's space in the party system risks reversal; the Left—at both the party level and in civil society—is fragmented and weak, while the Far Right is making gains. How can we understand the rapid rise, decline, and potential collapse of Syriza?

After a discussion of data sources used to underpin analysis, the following section offers a summary of key theories that seek to explain why a challenger party may lose electoral relevance and witness declining active participation; why a leftist faction may abandon the party; and why the party may face a legitimacy crisis among activist and radical-left spaces. These theories detail how and why an

outsider, antisystem, leftist party may (1) moderate its radical stance and become reformist; (2) squeeze radical voices or factions from the party; and (3) witness oligarchization processes that foster a distant leadership clique who run the party. While each theory alone may offer part of the explanation, I argue that it is necessary to bring these theories into discussion with one another to provide a more coherent appraisal of the challenges facing radical outsider-left parties. Combined, the theories can shed light on issues of party brand dilution as well as why promises to foster a participatory and internally democratic party may be jettisoned, in turn helping explain why radical outsider parties may face a crisis. However, I argue processes of brand dilution, factionalism, and oligarchization must be analyzed in conjunction with theories of popular counterpower and party-social movement linkage building in order to contextualize the rise-decline-collapse of parties. That is, to grasp why an antineoliberal outsider party may lose relevance, support, active participation, and legitimacy requires accounting for how and why it becomes a moderate and verticalist party—precisely the type of party rejected by the radical outsiders at their inception. However, what is generally missing from extant discussions about left-populist/outsider/antisystem parties is analysis of popular organization counterpower to resist and shape such processes.

Summarizing the argument presented below to explain Syriza's rise and fall, I argue that limits on radicalism set by pro-neoliberal actors in conjunction with an electoralist strategy built on appealing to as many potential voters as possible pressurized party leaders to dilute and moderate the party's radical brand. Party leaders sought to bypass engagement with radical critics via oligarchization and degenerative factionalism. As radical voices were excluded, the moderation process could advance more easily, which in turn fostered further verticalization and degenerative factionalism. Syriza's moderation-oligarchization-factionalism party-building process can be further contextualized by addressing the lack of popular counterpower to constrain the party leadership. Weak and fragmented movements could not offer the sort of organizational fulcrum for antineoliberalism that traditional unions had played for labor concerns. Lacking capacity to either engage in mass demonstrations in support of radicalism or to offer internal constraints on party leaders, moderation-verticalization-factionalism rapidly advanced. Syriza became a brand-diluted party with no organic connections to society. Despite an initial electoral surge, its vote share quickly crashed along with membership numbers and legitimacy, leaving the party vulnerable to collapse and replacement.

Materials and Methods

The case study analysis is underpinned by data collected via twenty semistructured interviews conducted between October through December 2022 and November through December 2024 in Athens and Crete in Greece. Interviews were conducted with an array of actors including movement organization leaders; current/former Syriza party elites; figures who quit Syriza to participate in splinter Left

parties such as MeRA-25 and New Left; party members from distinct wings within the party; people who have/had dual roles as party members and movement organization members; and members of Syriza Youth.[2] While one may critique the focus on interviewing people associated with Syriza while not bringing in a wider array of voices—for example, from the Communist Party—the selection criteria of interviewees does bring in voices from diverse positions/factions within Syriza. While semistructured qualitative interviews provide the majority of data utilized in the analysis, I also had informal discussions with leading academics/researchers from the Universities of Crete, Athens, the Aegean, Thessaloniki, and the Panteion, as well as the National Center for Social Research. Each of the dozen researchers/academics I spoke with were either (ex-)members of Syriza (from distinct wings and levels of the party) or were active participants in the movement scene, while their work focused on Syriza's rise/decline as well as its relationship with social movement/extraparliamentary actors. These meetings helped refine my analysis and to boost the validity of the argument presented. Moreover, I have remained in regular contact with these academic/researchers as well as interviewees to keep up to date with events.

Brand Dilution, Factionalism, and Oligarchy

As leftist party leaders seek to win office, they will be squeezed between popular demands for greater participation and improved living conditions, and domestic and transnational opposition demands for promarket orthodoxy as well as the protection of the interests of capital and its supporting and enabling elites (Brown 2022; Silva 2009). Radical-left parties that reach office may "turn from 'responsive' (to the demands of 'the people') to 'responsible' actors (in order to maintain institutional or economic stability from external pressures and constraints)" (Venizelos and Stavrakakis 2023: 301). Furthermore, where electoral interests of party leaders do not align with the concerns of their more radical core constituencies, leaders may abandon their representative role and shy away from a strong commitment to solutions promoted by their original membership base in order to advance their electoral gains (Hutter, Kriesi, and Lorenzini 2018). Yiannos Katsourides (2016: 40) states that when radical-left parties "assimilate with the state, they tend to prioritize citizens' everyday problems over any other goal, which eventually leads to de-radicalization. Radicalization typically results from the extra-parliamentary struggle, whereas elections constitute a mechanism of de-radicalization that necessitates moderation in order to win over undecided and centrist voters."

For parties born out of a crisis of representation due to the convergence of mainstream center-right and center-left parties around the implementation of neoliberal austerity policies, abandoning commitments to a clear break with neoliberalism represents a dilution of the party's brand. A party's brand is the image of it that voters develop by observing it over time, when they can identify that a party stands for something. Noam Lupu (2016) argues that to build a party brand, any new party must distinguish itself from other parties and its stance or behavior

must be consistent over time. Where a party becomes indistinguishable from other parties or if it veers markedly from one election to the next—that is, where the brand is diluted—the party risks its own longer-term survival. Whether brand dilution and moderation occur as a result of state assimilation and electoralism or adapting to pro-neoliberal oppositional limits, such deradicalization is bound to cost the party legitimacy and support in the long run. Moreover, such moderation may foster factional schisms within the party.

Factions within parties can affect the unity of a new party. As Nicole Bolleyer (2013: 3) states, "The capacity to maintain internal coherence is considered to be an important performance indicator, especially for parties that are still relatively new and have not yet proved themselves in higher office." In the case of leftist challenger parties, one faction may adopt a moderating approach while another advocates adhering to an antineoliberal position. It is possible that factionalism becomes degenerative as excessive fragmentation leads to irreconcilable cleavages between subgroups—which in turn may lead to public rifts that cost the party support or may lead to wholesale splits of cadres/subgroups from the party.

In addition to branding issues and factionalism, some theorists suggest that emergent Left parties will face what Robert Michels (1911) labels "the iron law of oligarchy," a supposedly inevitable process by which all horizontal movement organizations or parties will harden into elitist cartels that concentrate power at the top, de-emphasizing bottom-up participation. There is an assumption in Michels's thinking that even if parties have different genetic endowments, they will all travel in the same direction and end up the same—especially as they contest elections, institutionalize their structures, and access high electoral office. Such a process suggests that the leadership of new radical-left parties will drift away from the grassroots of their parties and from any movement organizations that interacted with the party at its genesis.

It is necessary to bring theories of moderation, factionalism, and oligarchization into discussion with one another. Combined, the theories can shed light on issues of party brand dilution as well as why promises to foster a participatory and internally democratic party may be jettisoned, in turn helping explain why a party born out of a crisis of neoliberal democracy may lose relevance as it ceases to offer an avenue for popular discontent. Opposition pressures and constraints, state assimilation, and electoralism all shed light on why a challenger party may moderate. Moreover, I suggest that the belief among some party leaders that moderation is required is likely to be a core driver of factionalism and oligarchization. That is, more radical factions inside the party are likely to be squeezed out if a dominant faction believes moderation is the best path forward. Furthermore, if the dominant block is promoderation, this may also encourage oligarchization and the eradication of internal participatory spaces as the (moderate) party leadership will seek to cut the influence of grassroots or movement organizations that are more likely to have radical demands than the moderate leaders (Brown 2022; Hutter, Kriesi, and Lorenzini 2018; Katsourides 2016).

While moderation tactics may lead to a boost of votes in the short run, the argument here is that this is a poor longer-term strategy to party building. There is a risk that the party leadership will sacrifice support from movement organizations and extraparliamentary forces as it submits to the needs of governing. An electoral party machine may emerge rather than a societally linked and internally democratic organization. Such an approach is unlikely to foster a stable party in the longer term (Levitsky et al. 2016; Lupu 2016). Moderating rather than building the party brand, squeezing out radical factions rather than encouraging their active participation, and seeking to build an agile electoral party machine rather than fostering internal democracy and linkages to civil society organizations echo elements of Claus Offe and Helmut Wiesenthal's (1980) characterization of opportunist organizational practices in working-class organizations. These authors suggest that opportunism entails inverting the means-end relationship, where short-term immediate gains are prioritized over future consequences and where there is an emphasis on getting as many people as possible into the organization rather than questioning who comes in and how it is they will actually participate in the organization.

While outsider-left party leaderships may seek to engage in short-term, unstable opportunistic party-building processes underpinned by processes of brand dilution, factional ejection of radicals, and oligarchization, what is missing from theorizing is the capacity to resist such processes. It is not sufficient to state that party leaders moderate the brand in the face of opposition or due to an electoralist strategy, nor is it sufficient to assume that oligarchization is an iron law that just occurs in every organization. Such teleological approaches (and suggestions that party leaders are simply "bad opportunists") need to be contextualized by bringing in discussions of popular counterpower to better explain the trajectories of outsider-left party building.

Popular Counterpower, Radical Factions, and Resistance

Building on earlier analyses of mass parties and trade union linkages that enabled workers' organizations to shape party leadership decision-making (see, for example, Przeworski and Sprague 1986; Offe and Wiesenthal 1980; Collier and Collier 1991), more recent theorists have explored the concept of popular counterpower, whereby unions or social movement organizations may play a role in monitoring and directing the actions of party leaderships (Anria 2018; Brown 2022; della Porta et al. 2017; Etchemendy 2020). While opposition pressures and state assimilation may encourage party leaders to moderate the brand, to eject unruly radical factions, and to seek to build an agile electoral machine organized around a leadership clique, theorists discussing movement-parties and popular counterpower suggest that it is possible for such processes to be partially counterbalanced where a powerful social movement organization field exists. The existence and strength of popular movement organizations willing and capable of interacting with a new leftist challenger party is a key variable which may influence brand

dilution/adherence to radicalism, degenerative factionalism and ejection of leftist bloc/cooperative pluralism with radical voices included in decision-making, and oligarchization/horizontalism.

Santiago Anria (2024) argues that for new outsider parties that emerge with connections to social movements, the trajectory of party building will be conditioned by a combination of historical factors relating to the strength and autonomous mobilization capacity of the movements. Organized popular sectors may seek to counterbalance oligarchization and brand dilution pressures via organic, empowered linkages to the party. For party leaders "to be constrained by a party's core constituency organizations, the latter should be autonomous. The autonomy of organizations implies that they have the capacity to set and communicate their preferences, regardless of the opinions of the party leaders. To constrain leaders, autonomous organizations also must hold significant clout within parties, regardless of their contingent electoral power" (Anria et al. 2022: 386). Moreover, there must be *formal linkages* or *informal linkages* between the party and these social organizations. Formal linkages include party statutes that institutionalize the participation of movement organizations in the party structure. Informal linkages refer to movement organization leaders and grassroots activists having dual memberships in the party and their constituent organization and popular organization leaders having strong informal ties to party leaders (Anria et al. 2022).

Popular organizations may also seek to pressurize party leaderships from outside. Contestatory mobilization refers to street demonstrations, roadblocks, strikes, or any form of contentious action against oligarchization and brand dilution by popular organizations. At one end of a continuum, contestatory mobilization may be considered strong where there are large numbers of people from an array of popular sector organizations and movements engaging in sustained waves of contentious action with clearly framed demands that challenge top-down decision-making or brand dilution. At the opposite end of the continuum, contestatory mobilization may be considered weak where small numbers of people from an individual organization focus on narrow demands and engage in one-off or sporadic contentious actions (Silva 2018).

In sum, popular counterbalancing power is stronger where there are organic connections between party leaderships and popular organizations and where popular organizations are capable of engaging in mass contestatory mobilization. Where counterpower is strong, movement organizations may push back against moderating tendencies of party leaders and the associated oligarchization and degenerative factionalism. Dialogic relations between party and societal organizations are more likely, allowing organizations greater voice and veto power to demand that the party adhere to its more radical brand. Party leaderships are more likely to remain connected to movement organizations and build roots in society, to keep one foot in the institutions and one foot in the streets. Moreover, where the radical faction of a party can point to a powerful movement field that has the potential to engage in mass mobilization—in support of radical policy

proposals or against moderation—its voice is likely to be louder in internal party debates, and it is less likely to be squeezed from the party. In sum, popular counterpower may press party leaders to adhere to a radical brand and to maintain and build societal linkages—the two fundamental tasks facing emergent parties if they are to survive beyond an initial surge.

Conversely, counterpower is weaker where no organic connections exist and where organizations lack mobilizational capacity. Where counterpower is weak, there will be little capacity to influence the party leaders via internal channels and there will be no capacity to demonstrate via mass mobilizations that there is in fact widespread support for more radical policies. If popular counterpower is weak, then it is more likely that outsider-left party leaderships will capitulate to the moderating pressures described above as well as promote the oligarchization and degenerative factionalism that allow such brand dilution to advance unopposed. Radical factions inside the party will be easily ignored by moderating leaderships who label them as disconnected from the realities of trying to grow the party.

The Rise and Decline of Greece's Syriza
BRAND MODERATION

Following elections in 2015, as the party with the largest vote share, though still short of a majority, Syriza formed an antiausterity government with the right-wing Independent Greeks (ANEL). Syriza leaders in Brussels and in the national parliament sought to reverse austerity measures and maintained a defiant discourse against the Troika oversight of Greece's domestic budgetary processes. After five months of negotiations with the Troika, and with public moneys running out, a referendum was called to decide whether Syriza should sign a new bailout agreement. The referendum was rejected by the electorate, with 62 percent voting "no." However, a week later the government signed a new agreement with Greece's creditors, removing the antibailout cleavage from the party system as all major parties now aligned around acceptance of Troika conditional lending.

The transnational leverage over Greece was extremely high; the "Syriza government faced the intractable contradiction that to fulfill its promise to stop the EU's economic torture, it would have to leave the EU, which would, given the global as well as European balance of forces and the lack of alternative production and consumption capabilities, lead to further economic suffering for an unforeseeable period" (Panitch and Gindin 2020: 35). One of the highest-ranking Syriza figures around 2015 told me (interview with author 7) that party leader Aléxis Tsipras was

> saying that "I will make a left-wing program while inside the EU." And he said this to Panagiotis Lafazanis (a leading voice from the more radical-left bloc of the party). Lafazanis said "No, you will not be able to," but Tsipras said "Yes, I will." And this is what we ended up saying to people in the elections, "Hope is coming." This was our motto, but we should have been preparing people

for a struggle ahead. When the EU says "we will close the banks and take the money from the Greek people" you cannot say no to them.

As a well-connected Syriza insider who was very close to the cabinet and ministers at the time told me (interview with author 1),

> Two big European bureaucrats walked into the Syriza ministers, demanding they open drawers, asking "Why are you doing that?" . . . Almost dictatorial. Black suited bureaucrats. The money would be stopped from coming in. . . . There would be no money for wages, pensions, hospitals were in complete disarray. There were beggars walking around, sixty thousand people living on the streets. Syriza had to deal with a humanitarian crisis. So, the compromises they made, well . . . it was a tough position.

The two quotes above from well-connected Syriza insiders demonstrate the enormous power over the new government to backtrack. While debates continue to this day within the Greek Left as to whether Syriza could and should have pulled the country out of the EU, the vast majority of Greeks did not want to leave. The reality is that Troika leaders wielded extraordinary leverage over Greece, and the misguided notion that a more experienced negotiating team could have achieved a better outcome is nonsense.

Following the referendum and the government's signing of new terms with Greece's creditors, Tsipras called snap elections in September 2015. Syriza's campaign for the election was clearly distinct from that which had brought it to power just a few months previously. In January, there was a clear echoing of popular protest demands for a deepening and extending of democratic quality with an end to austerity, a boosting of the economy and job provision, and an extension of welfare promised. Having just signed a new bailout agreement, the September campaign saw Syriza focus on a division between the *old* (represented by ND) and the *new* (represented by Syriza), calling on voters to prevent the old establishment returning to oversee the management of the bailout (Katsambekis 2019: 37–38). With the lowest electoral turnout since Greece's return to democracy in 1974 (56.6 percent), Syriza won the elections with 36.6 percent, six seats short of an absolute majority and once again forged a coalition with ANEL, while ND maintained its vote share of 28 percent.

Under the guidance of the "pragmatist" wing of Syriza, the government introduced "cutbacks in pensions, an income-tax hike on middle classes, the liberalization of evictions and purchase of non-performing housing loans from vulture funds, and the privatization of public utilities (e.g. water) and infrastructure (e.g. airports)" (Ferrero, Centeno, and Roumpakis 2022: 10). Ideals and programmatic promises outlined in the 2014 Thessaloniki Declaration, such as pledges to suspend additional layoffs in the public sector combined with promises to relax taxation for small and medium size entrepreneurs, were broken as it became apparent that the government could not keep the various promises made to different

target-groups (Petsinis 2016). Antiausterity and antineoliberalism ceased to be part of the party's brand. That is, Syriza's brand was diluted as it reneged on earlier commitments that had emerged from its interactions with movement organizations over the course of the protest era.

Facing a noncompromising European economic governance scenario, Syriza in the post–September 2015 government had little leeway to escape the "iron cage" rules of neoliberal Europe (Papadopoulos and Roumpakis 2018). The weak position of the Greek economy and its reliance on external borrowing gave the Troika enormous leverage over the Syriza negotiating team. The "Greek government under Syriza was constrained by the European Union to such an extent as to force it to withdraw its anti-neoliberal bluff" (Ferrero, Centeno, and Roumpakis 2022: 10).

Having been forced to seriously dilute the efforts at building a brand around strong left-wing social and economic policies, Syriza tried to focus on issues such as corruption while also seeking to offer a distinct programmatic agenda from its rival parties by seeking to safeguard the last remaining components of social rights for the most marginalized sectors. Over the 2015–19 period, the Syriza-led government did manage to offer free health care to two million uninsured people, free school meals, a minimum solidarity income for the poor, a pause on repossessions of family homes, a law granting citizenship to second-generation immigrants, and recognition of same-sex couples' civil partnerships and the right for same-sex couples to adopt and foster children (Venizelos and Stavrakakis 2023). Discussing the 2015–19 period of Syriza in government, a former member of the Political Secretariat of Syriza (interview with author 5) suggests analyzing the liberal axis and the economic axis, noting,

> In terms of economic policy, we had successes and some shortcomings. There were some reforms around labor laws and collective rights that were important. But there was no productive or economic transformation. Look, many of the things have to be understood within the limits of the Memorandum. It is evident now that there was a switch toward the liberal agenda, the government started taking measures regarding democratic participation, electoral law, introducing a PR system, same-sex couples, things like this.

While these progressive advances may have been all the government believed attainable given the level of transnational leverage, the fact remains that rather than holding to its preelection promises—or withdrawing from office to play an opposition role rather than implementing austerity—the brand was deeply diluted as Syriza in office came to resemble a third-way social democratic party while implementing fiscal policies traditionally associated with economic liberalism. Indeed, following its initial burst on to the scene with promises of shaking up Greek politics by advocating an antineoliberal platform and a new party form, Syriza would come to be seen as a "normal" moderate party as the Pragmatic party leaders sought to rebrand as a "responsible" party.[3] This strategy would ultimately

culminate in the party's demise as it ceased to offer a coherent alternative to the traditional big two parties.

A popular argument for explaining Syriza's demise relates to the notion that the party's lack of prior governing experience impacted its capacity to manage the crisis. The argument follows that if Syriza had successfully managed to get Greece out of the crisis, the party could have secured further electoral victories while adhering to its radical brand without needing to moderate to open toward the median voter. However, such an argument lacks nuance and, as I demonstrate below, fails to capture the realities of Syriza's party-building process, which culminated in a brandless party with no societal connections—thereby leaving it vulnerable to replacement in the party system. Of course, had the party been able to get Greece out of the crisis it may well have won more elections. But this is fanciful thinking. First, as detailed above by interviewees who were inside the upper echelons of Syriza at the time of engagement with the Troika, the external pressures on Greece were enormous, and it is highly doubtful that a more experienced party than Syriza could have negotiated alternative terms for the bailout.

It is certainly the case that Syriza's incapacity to escape the confines of the Troika forced it to backtrack and moderate, and this then cost the party legitimacy among the electorate. However, as I outline in the following analysis, initial brand dilution in the face of powerful external constraints is only part of the explanation for the direction and outcomes of Syriza's party-building process. As argued below, the party leadership could have pushed to maintain a clearer distinction between Syriza and PASOK, calling for a reclamation of more radically leftist policies in the aftermath of the end of its initial term in office and as the strictures of MoU agreements relaxed. However, the Pragmatic bloc of the party eschewed such an approach, calling instead for a fundamental rebranding of Syriza that rejected adhering to an antineoliberal stance as it sought to replace PASOK.

Approaching the 2019 elections, Syriza had transformed into "a confused political mishmash of leftists, social democrats, conservatives and right-wing populists that defends the very neoliberal policies Syriza once threatened to destroy the eurozone over" (Kazamias 2019). Party brand building entails repeated adherence to a program that is markedly distinct from other parties of the party system, with policy-based performances that create partisan reputation. In its policy-based performance, Syriza became less and less distinguishable from other parties by diluting its brand. Syriza's 2019 national election campaign "lacked any reference to either social movements or a radical alternative to neoliberalism. Instead, it opted to campaign on a realist platform of programmatic priorities and interventions within the confines of European economic governance" (Ferrero, Centeno, and Roumpakis 2022: 11).

Syriza lost the 2019 elections to New Democracy. The party had morphed into a moderate electoral vehicle, unwilling or incapable of acting as a funnel for the demands of social movement organizations, opting away from a pioneering, antineoliberal path. As a Syriza party strategist at the time told me, the moderate

viewpoint which dominated Syriza by 2019 became more entrenched over the course of the New Democracy government as the Pragmatic leadership sought to win the support of moderate, centrist and former PASOK voters (interview with author 2). The electoralist approach led the dominant bloc of Syriza leaders to focus on absorbing PASOK cadres and voters by rebranding itself as a responsible party capable of governing. Echoing Offe and Wiesenthal (1980), the Pragmatic leadership engaged in opportunistic organization building, reneging on the original organizational goals to build a radical and democratic party that would challenge Greece's long-standing two-party system underpinned by neoliberal rationale. This, I argue, is what fostered dwindling support and legitimacy for the party as it became a brandless party with no societal connections. The challenger party ceased to offer a challenge. To gain further insight into how this process unfolded, it is necessary to grasp how Pragmatic leaders drove the party further to the right. While some members of the more leftist bloc of cadres within Syriza (known as the Umbrella bloc) would argue that the party must retake a more radical policy stance and reforge relations to movement organizations, they were sidelined via degenerative factionalism and oligarchization processes.

OLIGARCHIZATION

Syriza became a centralized party with a closed leadership, detached from its membership and its electorate. The party leadership were concerned about competing for office and sought to bring the leading cadres from the main body of the party and movement realm into the leadership orbit, with "little attention paid to who would be left in the party to act as an organizing cadre in society" (Panitch and Gindin 2020: 32). Considerable power was centered around Tsipras, who wielded autonomy and executive power. Ordinary members of Syriza had no influence as decision-making was dominated by the central organisms of the party with little scope for internal debate or participation. In reality, "more or less the same group of people clustered around Tsipras made the electoral campaigns. And for candidate selection, even though officially there is supposed be candidate selection in Congress and with input from below, really the president of the party is handpicking many of these" (interview with author 7). Tsipras's goal "was to make the leftist organizations inside Syriza shut up so he would be less pressured. He wanted to follow his path without having to face pressure from his left. For example, previously someone could be both a Syriza member and a member of the Maoist group, but from now on, they would only be a member of Syriza, and the Maoist organization would no longer exist" (interview with author 11). The quotes above support the contention that the dominant bloc of Syriza sought to engage in opportunistic organization building (Offe and Wiesenthal 1980). The "Pragmatic" leadership's strategy to build Syriza and ensure party survival focused on maximizing potential votes and boosting membership numbers while eschewing the original organization goals of building an antineoliberal and radically democratic party as an alternative to the status quo. In order for the Pragmatists to pursue

their agenda, oligarchization was actively pursued in order to isolate these party leaders from radical voices within the party.

When radical activists joined the party, the leadership offered no support to those sectors of the party body that wished to deepen the linkages to the activists' networks (Panitch and Gindin 2020: 32). The "base of the party began to wither away as a lot of the cadre moved into the government sphere, and the party was left weak. Cartelization appeared in the party, Tsipras was strengthened, he became the only source of power in the party" (interview with author 1). A cleavage had emerged between the party in government (dominated by the Pragmatists) and the main body of the party. Key decisions and candidate selection were controlled by an isolated leadership clique.

The internal democratic structures of the party were further adapted following Syriza's 3rd Congress in 2022. Until 2022, local branches of the party elected representatives for the Congress of the party (3,000–3,500 members), who in turn elected the president and the Central Committee (about two hundred members purportedly tasked with implementing decisions adopted at Congress). The Central Committee also elected the executive of the party, the Political Secretariat, a small body tasked with coordinating political actions and answerable to the Central Committee. Prior to the 3rd Congress, Tsipras argued that voting for the president and Central Committee should be opened to all members, rather than going through the local branch-Congress pathway, while the leftist faction of Syriza centered around Euclid Tsakalotus' "Umbrella bloc" opposed the proposed reforms.

During the 2019–22 period, however, there was a drive (led by the Pragmatists) to boost membership at the base of the party and about 100,000–120,000 new members joined. The mass opening of the party to anybody who simply had to pay 2 euros to sign up allowed anyone to join, irrespective of their political position. As numerous discussions with Syriza insiders told me, people with no history of participation in leftist organizations or socialization in progressive politics entered, and hence the membership base became less left-aligned and more moderate. A Syriza technocrat close to high-ranking MPs and ex-ministers told me that post-2019, with the party lacking any presence in popular organizations, Tsipras realized, first, that Syriza was not a mass party, and second,

> he felt that there were too many old leftists constraining him from doing whatever he wanted. So, he decided to expand the party. At the 3rd Congress the leftists are saying, "You cannot open the party too much; you are bringing in people who do not belong with us." Tsipras sees these voices as an impediment to bypass, and he argues that every member of the party should be allowed to vote for the president and the Central Committee. He presented this as being a democratic turn for the party, but really this fostered a centralization of power in Tsipras and the top of the party. He is substituting Tsipras for Syriza. (Interview with author 12)

The strategy adopted by the Pragmatists of boosting membership numbers —irrespective of ideological positioning—went hand in hand with the goal of diluting the influence of radicals in the party so that the Pragmatists could more easily dilute the party brand and appeal to a more moderate and centrist electorate including (ex-)PASOK voters. The more leftist Umbrella bloc inside Syriza critiqued the reforms, arguing that while allowing all members to vote may appear to deepen democratic participation, it decreases scope for internal party debate at local branches and ends the role of local branches in candidate selection for Congress. Moreover, Congress would no longer act as a space for debate and discussion before selecting members for the Central Committee or who should be president. New members who were encouraged to join Syriza who may not have any ideological positioning that reflects the original goal of the party as an antineoliberal, democratizing force, and without participating in any form of political socialization or ideological discussion in any branch of the party, could now vote for the president and Central Committee. Given Tsipras's overwhelming dominance among the base members of the party, he and members of the Pragmatist wing of the party were thus guaranteed to dominate the Central Committee and the Political Secretariat, bypassing internal debate with the critical leftists at Congress.

DEGENERATIVE FACTIONALISM

From 2015 on, degenerative factionalism became a defining feature of Syriza. As the Pragmatic bloc of the party came to dominate all decision-making channels, and with each further wave of moderation, a series of schisms occurred as the most left-leaning factions of the party split from Syriza. In the summer of 2015 and in response to the government's signing of the MoU, the most left-leaning MPs in Syriza vocally challenged the government before splintering to form a new party, Popular Unity. The loss of the harder-left voices (in the party, MPs, and rank-and-file members) further undermined the party's linkages to, and legitimacy in the eyes of, popular movement organizers and activists. Moreover, while the voices that left the party accounted for only about 2 percent of the popular vote inside the party, they represented about 25 percent of the cadre of the party, with many coming from Communist and activist backgrounds with good knowledge of how to organize (interview with author 1). Furthermore, lacking voice inside the party, 60–70 percent of the members of the Youth of the party—who were dual members in movement organizations and Syriza—left the party at this moment. Degenerative factionalism also witnessed influential individuals who were connected to the movementist and extraparliamentary Left, such as Gabriel Sakellarides and Tasos Koronakos, break from the party. Summarizing this initial process of degenerative factionalism, a former member of Syriza's Political Secretariat told me (interview with author 5) that if "you look at the party in December 2015 and the moment of rupture, in terms of immediate relations with movements, of course the people who were dealing with the movements until the summer of 2015 suddenly were

not in the party, or at least a big part of them." As discussed below, severing ties with popular organizations would weaken popular counterpower to influence the party-building process led by the Pragmatists.

Following defeat by ND in the 2019 elections, a second phase of degenerative factionalism began. Apart from challenging bureaucratization and centralization of power around Tsipras, the Umbrella bloc was critical of the direction of the party as it moderated its policy stance to appeal to ex-PASOK voters as well as to the opening of the party to ex-PASOK MPs, in conjunction with the fracturing of relations with movement organizations. There were calls from the left-leaning faction to rebuild the brand of Syriza as a distinctly leftist option for voters. However, given the oligarchic nature of decision-making in Syriza, critical voices were easily sidelined. As a former Syriza insider notes (interview with author 5), at the Central Committee and Political Secretariat meetings there was little actual debate; the factionalism within the party led to a scenario of "a permanent majority in the party and a permanent minority. So, nobody cares about debate. It is like we have a minority in the party that will always be the minority, and they will keep raising their voices, but they don't actually care to enter into debate. On other hand of course, we are the majority so don't need to listen." That is, the oligarchization process detailed above enabled the Pragmatists to bypass debate with the more radical faction, which over time fostered degenerative factionalism as the left flank of the party felt ignored and useless inside Syriza. Hence many leftists decided to quit the party—thereby furthering the capacity of the Pragmatists to dominate and build a top-down, brand-diluted social democratic party.

The position of the critical Umbrella bloc voices was weakened not simply because of their position as a minority faction but also because they did not have friendly relations with a powerful, coherent leftist force outside of the party in movement organizations that could pressure the party (see below for further discussion). Critical voices inside the party could not demonstrate to Tsipras that there was a potent popular movement agitating for greater horizontal participation and a more radical policy stance. In such a scenario, Tsipras ridiculed critical voices from the Umbrella bloc, stating "We are no longer the party of 4 percent" (interview with author 15); "What social forces is it you are talking about when you say reconnect with the movements?" (interview with author 12); and "We are now a party of over 30 percent and are not going back to some minoritarian idealism" (interview with author 14). That is, it was easy for the Pragmatists in the party to sideline critique coming from inside the party because critical voices could not point toward a powerful left flank outside of the party.

The Pragmatic bloc's strategy of building a brand-diluted, oligarchic party, however, failed to woo back voters as Tsipras had argued. In 2023, the party was humiliated at the ballot box. In elections in May 2023, Syriza won 20 percent before declining further to just 18 percent June elections.[4] ND's winning margin of almost 23 percent represented the largest winning margin in recent Greek history. Syriza's vote share collapsed in working-class constituencies, while even in

traditionally left-leaning Crete the party fared poorly. Syriza's collapse did not lead to a boost in support for any of the leftist splinter parties that had emerged following the 2015 signing of the MoU. For example, former finance minister for Syriza Yanis Varoufakis had established a new political vehicle—MeRA25—to contest elections in 2019, winning 3.4 percent. In the 2023 elections, MeRA25 and Popular Unity (formed following the degenerative factionalism in 2015) ran together as MeRA25-Alliance for Rupture. While the coalition aimed at rebuilding a critical, radical-left space, it failed to meet the minimum 3 percent threshold required to have any elected representatives in parliament.

Tsipras resigned as Syriza leader in the wake of the elections, with Stefanos Kasselakis winning the ensuing leadership contest. Lacking any historic connection to Syriza or the Greek Left scene, thirty-five-year-old business mogul Kasselakis promoted himself as both an entrepreneur and a political outsider. To understand how Kasselakis could come to lead a formerly radical-outsider party, one must grasp how Tsipras had transformed the party. First, Syriza's prolonged withdrawal from society as it cut ties with the movement sphere, isolated and ignored local branches of the party, and its lack of union affiliations meant that the party did not play any sort of role in the socialization of its members. Second, Tsipras's efforts to boost membership numbers—irrespective of ideological positions or backgrounds—witnessed a further dilution of the ideological position of the base members of the party. The membership, and its exclusion from any real debate or participation in party decision-making, left behind a rank-and-file base that was not versed in leftist politics. Third, the shift in party electoral processes following the 3rd Congress meant that any member could vote for the president. Fourth, given the declining electoral fortunes of Syriza and the constant internal party bickering among the different factions, the base members had become disillusioned with the entire leadership spectrum (interviews with various Syriza insiders and Umbrella bloc members). The leftist Umbrella bloc headed by Euclid Tsakalotous, the 6+6 bloc headed by Efi Achtsioglou—a bloc of younger MPs who quietly critiqued Tsipras's moderating turn while supporting him publicly in addition to backing his proposed electoral reforms at the 3rd Congress—and Nicos Pappas of the Pragmatic Tsipras bloc were all on the ballot for the leadership election. These factional leaders failed to grasp the extent of discontent within the rank and file, and when Kasselakis campaigned on social media promising to clean up Syriza and drain it of its inefficient leaders, he easily won the elections with the backing of a membership base that had not been socialized in leftist politics and was free to vote directly for the party leader.

Kasselakis sought to move the party further to the right and called for the expulsion of three prominent Umbrella members, suggesting he would put the issue to a referendum among party members. This proved the final straw for the Umbrella bloc, as degenerative factionalism once more witnessed the most left-leaning bloc split from Syriza. At the moment of rupture, the faction claimed Kasselakis was a right-wing populist, and they established a new party

along with the 6+6 group of MPs called New Left. The party was headed by Alexis Haritsis of the 6+6 bloc. About five thousand of Syriza's members joined New Left's eleven MPs.

Kasselakis was removed by the Syriza Political Secretariat just eleven months after his election, with the party in disarray as it struggled to identify a party brand or to forge any connection with Greek society. European elections in 2024 witnessed the continuing decline of Syriza (14.9 percent), the growth of PASOK (12.8 percent), and the irrelevance of the fractured and fragmented leftist options as MeRA25 and New Left failed to get any MEPs elected. Neither splinter party could muster support in the aftermath of the Syriza experience.

MODERATION- FACTIONALISM-OLIGARCHIZATION

The Pragmatic Tsipras bloc believed that confronting the Troika lenders was not possible, while electoral imperatives and demonstrating that Syriza was a responsible party required a wholesale dilution of the party's once radical brand. In order to push forward with this moderation process, he sought to bypass any radical voices that rejected such brand dilution. The more radical-left bloc of the party was seen by the "realist" Pragmatics as an inconvenient annoyance. Where such processes occur and where the radical faction sees its opinions sidelined by the dominant faction, it is highly likely that the party will split (repeatedly) from its left. Syriza became an increasingly oligarchic party while those more critical voices were forced out of the party over the course of a ten-year period as degenerative factionalism led to Syriza becoming a centrist party with no connections to any social movement organization or the activist scene more broadly. Whether taking a critical perspective or justifying their own actions, there is general agreement with such analysis across a wide array of actors I interviewed—from party cadres who remain active and loyal to Syriza to ex-cadres who split from the party, from critical activists to former and current Syriza Youth members. There is universal acceptance that Syriza leaders sought to moderate the party brand in the face of electoral and opposition pressures, and this fostered tensions with the more radical sectors whose influence needed to be controlled or isolated.

WEAK POPULAR COUNTERPOWER

The trajectory of party building and the extent of moderation-factionalism-oligarchization may be impacted by the existence or nonexistence of powerful popular organizations. Autonomous popular organizations may share party linkages (dual roles, close informal connections to party leaders) that allow them to shape decision-making processes. Moreover, popular organizations may seek to engage in street demonstrations that influence party building. However, in the case of Syriza, empowered organic connections between movements and party did not exist, while contestatory mobilization capacity was weak. In turn, there was little counterpower to the moderating pressures that party leaders faced; the internal radical faction could be easily sidelined as the Umbrella bloc could not

point to a powerful street movement supporting their agenda, while oligarchization advanced as party leaders faced little resistance from below.

By 2015, some social movement organizations rebuffed collaborating with Syriza and went back to focus on small sectoral/single issue concerns and others split into factions over whether to work with Syriza, while others still were absorbed into the unified party, losing their autonomy and capacity to challenge the party leadership. The

> story of the Greek Left after 2015, and continuing through to today, is a story of splits. It is part of a sense of a culture of defeat that prevailed among left-wing activists after 2015, especially those extraparliamentary Left organizations that were part of ANTARSYA[5] and other organizations of the Left that were part of Syriza and then left. . . . All of those splits went and split again, it was like an amoeba dividing again and again. Syriza's main impact was to break connections within and across leftist organizations around a general conception of a social transformation. (Interview with author 17)

While exhaustion, frustration, and a sense of futility in trying to fight the Troika partly explains the moderate nature of contestatory street mobilizations, activists I spoke with all concurred that the multiple fractures within movement organizations and between movement organizations witnessed a civil society that had very weak levels of mobilization capacity.

Many activists that were affiliated with Syriza were absorbed into the state apparatus, breaking their links with their movement organizations (interview with author 10). As Marina Prentoulis (2021: 63) notes, Syriza's executives claimed they needed all of the party's manpower to fill the state machine, leaving behind a debilitated party and a void where grassroots activity should have occurred. While more radical activist organizers sought to challenge Syriza's U-turn, they lacked coherent organizations with solid grassroots bases, while first-time protesters that participated during the 2010–15 cycle returned to their houses rather than joining movement organizations.

Moreover, divisions among the broader leftist movement organization field that had partly subsided during the antibailout convergence moment of 2010–15 resurfaced, debilitating the collective power required to sustain mass contestatory mobilization. After 2015,

> when many political activists left Syriza, ministers who resigned, trade unionists, activists from below . . . when they left Syriza, probably more than one thousand left. And they were the most active part of Syriza, the ones connected to society and the struggles from below. But they did not leave as a coherent force saying, "OK, we may have some differences, but we all disagree with the Memorandum, austerity, and neoliberalism." They left fragmented, different microfactions of the Left with microbureaucracies. (Interview with author 17)

While the "Greek left unified around the 'No' campaign for the referendum on the Memorandum, after this all of the old fractures in the left reemerged" (interview with author 2). As theorists evaluating the concept of counterpower suggest (Anria 2018; Brown 2022), these splits weakened the movements' capacity to shape the decision-making processes of the Pragmatic party leader, to hold leaders to a radical agenda, or to resist the verticalist and oligarchic structure that was emerging in the party.

Furthermore, with little pressure coming from the streets to resist brand moderation, the Pragmatists in the party easily sidelined critique coming from inside the party as Umbrella bloc voices could not point to a powerful left flank outside of the party. Describing the scenario in late 2022, an interviewee captured the challenging scenario, noting that the

> leftists in the party are weak. They are not really between anything. There is the Tsipras wing, and the leftist wing. . . . Because the movements are weak, the left of the party are weakened. The movement organizations get weaker because they do not have public representation in a national party, and the Left inside Syriza are weak because they do not have links to powerful movements, all of which allows Tsipras to control the party. (Interview with author 12)

This is a key point for evaluating the pathways of outsider-to-insider party building. The nature of popular organizational capacity and linkages to the party do matter—internal factional disputes can be heavily impacted by the presence or not of powerful street organizations. Where mobilization capacity is weak, where there are not mass protests in support of radical policies, "Pragmatists" in the party can more easily argue that a moderation path is necessary to win votes—while critical leftists inside the party can be labeled as unrealistic radicals.

There is a second, intertwined issue here. The lack of scope for an internal push to radicalize the party (which was influenced by weak popular counterpower) fed back onto movement organizer and activist opinions regarding Syriza. Critical voices in movement organizations rejected Syriza as a potential vehicle capable of adopting a democratizing and antineoliberal position, in turn further weakening the capacity of critical voices inside the party to challenge brand dilution and oligarchization in a vicious circle. As a respected voice within the extra-parliamentary Left scene stresses,

> The Umbrella block who claim they want to reconnect to movements, to change things from inside the party . . . being in a party that has rationally and constantly abandoned any identification as a movementist party of the Left, and to then say we will reconnect to movements and radicalism is completely nonsensical. . . . This story has finished, the Syriza-movement path. . . . People in the movements are very hostile to Syriza now. (Interview with author 3)

However, lacking organic connections to a radical party willing to fight for antineoliberal positions via the institutions weakens movement organizations. A Syriza Youth organizer cogently summarized the situation, stating,

> You cannot effect change without social pressure and mobilization, people on the street. From the perspective of movement organizations, the problem is that by being disenfranchised from Syriza, the reaction of the more active members of the movements was to become more hardened. Instead of being an agent for change, the movements became closed off. For Syriza, it is like a negative feedback loop, this absence of pressure and links to the movements. . . . You have the right wing of the party saying, "Social movements are dead, ineffective, they are minoritarian and cannot do anything, and so we need a broader coalition with more centrist type people, less radical." At the same time, this makes the voices in the party that do want to be part of the movements, it makes it more difficult for them because if Syriza is becoming more centrist, then the people who want to link to movements are left thinking, "What am I doing here?" This feeds back on to the increasing sectarian outlook of the movements, and it will I think also lead to electoral defeat for Syriza. (Interview with author 14)

This analysis captures precisely the state of affairs in the Greek Left a decade after Syriza's electoral breakthrough. There remains in 2025 a hangover from the Syriza experience with leftist organizations unwilling or unable to reforge horizontal links and build collective power. After the "Syriza experience, most of the people who used to be very active, part of leaderships on the left, are in a very self-critical mode of thinking and are not sure of their convictions anymore. Not in terms of convictions of being leftist. But unsure in terms of the best instruments and tactics to achieve our aims" (interview with author 13). Another organizer stated that "we are still in a state of defeat and paralysis following our Syriza experiences." Indeed, speaking with organizers in 2024, there is a general sense that there is a struggle to keep many movement organizations going, as active participation levels have collapsed (interviews with authors 18, 19, and 20).

OUTCOMES OF THE SYRIZA PARTY-BUILDING PROCESS

There is a real possibility that Syriza will continue to lose electoral relevance as PASOK retakes the place in the party system as a moderate opposition to a now hegemonic ND. The various small Left parties that exist following degenerative factionalism have failed to capture the attention of the electorate, while the weak and fragmented movement scene reinforces the difficulties facing any leftist party seeking to break through and offer a real electoral alternative to Syriza and PASOK. The Greek Communist Party (KKE) has performed relatively well, garnering over 7 percent in recent elections. However, the KKE has not demonstrated willingness to work with extraparliamentary Left forces or any other leftist parties and will likely struggle to grow beyond its current popularity.

While it may seem like the obvious solution is to rebuild horizontal linkages across fractured organizations, the fissures opened up as a consequence of the Syriza experience remained difficult to overcome a decade after the party's electoral surge. Indeed, not only has the Syriza experience fostered a reluctance among extra-parliamentary forces to reengage with the party sphere, but there is a sort of bunkerization as each small group retreats into its own orbit, unwilling to work with other organizations to build collective power. A key organizer in MeRA25 told me,

> The problem is not that we do not want this or that organization involved with us. The problem is between the organizations themselves. They veto arrangements if this or that organization is involved with us. We would like to work with ANTARSYA, they have a lot of good organizers, and we want to work with ANAMETRISI[6] as they are close to us programmatically and ideologically. But sometimes the organizations veto each other, you know, "If you talk to them, then don't talk to me." (Interview with author 16)

When I posed the question to interviewees from activist circles and from political parties as to whether the Greek Left was more divided in 2024 than it was in 2010, there was near universal agreement that there was greater fragmentation than previously. Indeed, when interviewees were asked what the key legacy of the Syriza experience was, most pointed directly to the issue of fragmentation, distrust, and a withdrawal from interacting with other groups or political parties. In short, outsider party-building processes are heavily influenced by, and impact upon, the movement organization sphere.

Syriza's failure to build a party brand or present a coherent plan on how to help overcome the hardships facing Greece's popular sectors meant that it failed to break from its association with betrayal and austerity. In conjunction with its lack of organic connections to movement organizations or trade unions, not only is the party's stability in jeopardy, but it has allowed ND to present itself as the only real option for voters. As Panagiotis Sotiris (2023) cogently states, ND's

> success was also the result of Syriza's abandonment of any strategic orientation. Its "left identity" never translated into a coherent plan for government—not even a reformist one. Towards the end of its tenure, it refused to chart a new course following the nominal conclusion of the Memoranda. It made general references to moving beyond austerity, maintaining some public control over certain utilities and reinstating parts of labor legislation that had hitherto been suspended—but none of this amounted to a forward-looking policy platform. . . . New Democracy could thereby present itself as the only credible party—while Syriza, having failed to present an alternative program during its years in office, failed to convince the public that one was possible.

What is more, given the weak opposition from its left, at the same time that there has been a growth in support for the Far Right, ND has increasingly adopted the Far Right's rhetoric as it embeds itself in office for another four-year term.

Concluding Remarks: Responding to Crises of Democracy, Antineoliberal Parties, and Popular Sector Organization

As in other Southern European and Andean countries, in the Greek case the underlying crisis of market democracy in the age of neoliberal globalization that opened space for outsider parties to gain ground in the last decade was not resolved. The Left response in the form of Syriza's brand-diluted social democracy did little to assuage the socioeconomic concerns of the popular sectors in Greece. A cost-of-living crisis as inflation soared following COVID-19 and the Russian invasion of Ukraine, housing scarcity and unaffordable rents, flexible labor with low pay, and weak state protection of vulnerable citizens remained entrenched challenges facing Greek society in the 2020s. With high immigration levels, and with the Left failing to offer a response to popular sector socioeconomic concerns, the conditions were ripe for far-right forces to make ground while pulling ND with them. The culmination of the Syriza outsider-to-insider process ultimately left the progressive forces in Greece facing a mammoth task of rebuilding legitimacy while confronting the rising xenophobic nationalist drift in the country's politics.

Where outsider-left parties compete for office, electoral strategies, state assimilation processes, and opposition pressures will always exert pressures on party leaders to moderate and to dilute the influence of radical voices via degenerative factionalism and oligarchization. Echoing issues confronting other radical outsider parties such as Spain's Podemos (see Brown 2024), Syriza witnessed oligarchization, as Michels (1911) suggested. Echoing components of Offe and Wiesenthal's (1980) sociological theory of opportunism, the Syriza case supports the contention that party leaders may moderate from original goals in order to keep the organization stable going forward, and that this may entail leaders ignoring demands of factions of their membership. As the maintenance of the organization (understood by party leaders as requiring vote maximization and increasing membership numbers) came into conflict with adhering to the founding goals of the organization (adhering to a radical antineoliberal brand and the building of a horizontal democratic party), leaders sought to build a party around oligarchic, vertical leader-base relations that allowed leaders to act against the concerns of more radical voices.

The Syriza experience highlights the need for popular counterpower if moderation-factionalism-oligarchization processes are to be avoided. Syriza was not tethered to a powerful labor union or any other popular organization capable of constraining leaders. Unlike the MAS in Bolivia (Brown 2022), the European outsider-left parties of today, such as Podemos and Syriza, do not share such societal linkages. Popular sectors are more dispersed. For Syriza (and Podemos), weak popular counterpower from below allowed moderation of the brand to go almost unopposed. Moreover, in the absence of a muscular societal organization representing demands for antineoliberal representation in the institutions, radical factions inside Syriza were easily ignored and branded as unrealistic.

Weak counterpower meant party leaders opted for wholesale moderation—and the accompanying verticalization and degenerative factionalism to bypass any critics—but this party-building strategy witnessed not the coherence of an embedded and institutionalized party but rather its opposite. Moreover, where factional splits occurred and new parties sought to establish themselves to the left of Syriza, they struggled to build momentum. The nature of Syriza's development furthered the belief among movement organizations and activists that they should retain wholesale autonomy from the party sphere, in turn weakening the potential counterpower to brand dilution and oligarchization processes in any future leftist party building. Indeed, a major challenge facing any leftist party in Greece following the Syriza experience is the discontent within activist/radical circles regarding institutional politics (an almost identical scenario in the aftermath of Podemos's rise and decline in Spain; see Brown 2024 for analysis).

While the moderation-factionalism-oligarchization party-building process was justified by Syriza's Pragmatic leaders as necessary to capture the electoral opportunity presented by the crisis of Greece's long-standing two-party system, the failure to build a radical party brand or to foster a societally linked party would ultimately prove to be Syriza's undoing. Diluting the brand and creating a normal, vertical party structure meant Syriza lost its relevance to the wider electorate and participation levels in the party plummeted, while the party lost legitimacy among the Greek activist and leftist scene. For outsider, antineoliberal parties to compete in the long run, they must build a radical brand and they must build societal connections across territories. Where powerful popular organizations do not exist, the pull on party leaders to moderate and excise radical voices will likely see antineoliberal outsider parties become moderate, top-down vehicles, placing the very survival of the party at risk. It is therefore essential that popular movements remain/become strong in their own right, since only strong movement organizations will ensure that an outsider-left party in office actually adheres to its radical brand. Here lies the crucial challenge. Where powerful popular organizations already exist, the task is to foster organic connections to a political vehicle that ensures bottom-up oversight of party leaders and to prevent moderation in the face of pressures. Bolivia's MAS offers guidance on the potentials and pitfalls of building such a movement-party (see Brown 2022). However, where powerful popular organizations (be they unions, neighborhood associations, or broader social movements) do not exist, the challenge for progressives is to begin by building them. Putting the cart before the horse—seeking to win elections and then via the party foster societal organization—is not a recipe for success. It is popular society that must build the party, not vice versa.

Understanding the dilemmas, old and new, for radical outsider parties in an era of disorganized and demobilized popular sectors is critical. Pursuing a more democratic and egalitarian economic, social, and political system requires the building of radical and democratic parties. Eschewing party politics and electoral democratic processes and adopting autonomous stances that reject the party

sphere simply opens space for the Far Right to present itself as the only electoral alternative to the delegitimized traditional mainstream center-left and center-right parties. If outsider, antineoliberal, movementist parties wish to become stable options in the party system in the longer term, it is essential that party leaders and strategists grasp the importance of fostering organic connections with popular organizations if they wish to avoid being seen as "just another party." While adhering to a radical brand is tough when confronting the structural power of capital in a conservative regional setting and a hostile domestic environment, party leaderships *can* encourage empowered party-base connections. Those that do so are more likely to survive beyond their embryonic phase. Understanding such processes, and whether antineoliberal movementist parties offer long-term solutions to the current crises of democracy or whether they are destined to absorb popular movement power before withering away, is of critical importance in an age of democratic discontent in which far-right parties have gained the upper hand.

John Brown is a lecturer at the Centre for the Study of Politics in the Department of Sociology at Maynooth University, Ireland. His current research, funded by the Irish Research Council Pathway Programme (21/PATH-A/9386), explores the evolving relations between left-wing parties and movements in Southern Europe and the Andes. His research can be found via his ORCID page at https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6224-8015.

Acknowledgments

TABLE 1 List of interviewees

#	Party/organization and position
1	Founding member of Syriza, ex-member of party planning committee, key adviser to party leadership
2	Former Syriza cadre affiliated with Umbrella Bloc, left to participate in New Left
3	Activist, writer at *Jacobin*. Key figure among Greek activist scene
4	Journalist, embedded in Greek extraparliamentary Left scene
5	Former member of Syriza Political Secretariat and Central Committee, split to participate in New Left as part of 6+6 faction
7	Former leading figure in Syriza between 2012 and 2015
8	Part of MeRA25 steering committee
9	Political secretariat member of MeRA25, historic links to student movements and extraparliamentary Left scene
10	Former editor at Syriza-linked newspaper *Avgi*
11	ANTARSYA activist, organizer
12	Syriza party technocrat, attended internal party leader discussions regarding direction and strategy
13	ANAMETRISI activist, organizer
14	Syriza Youth Secretary
15	Syriza Youth Athens Branch Central Office
16	MeRA25 policy adviser
17	Activist researcher with links to ANTARSYA, ANAMETRISI
18	Activist, ANAMETRISI
19	Activist, ANTARSYA
20	Syriza Youth member

Notes

1 The term "Troika" refers to the single decision-making group forged from three entities, the European Commission, European Central Bank, and International Monetary Fund.

2 I have anonymized interviewees. These actors remain central figures within their organizations and parties and are active participants in ongoing sensitive discussions relating to movement-party linkages in 2025. See table 1 for interviewee details.

3 This view was shared by the majority of interviewees, even those who remain close to the Pragmatic bloc. Within activist-organizer circles, dozens of informal discussions highlighted how Syriza became delegitimized. The analysis is also shared by Greek academics with whom I spoke informally.

4 The May elections failed to deliver a majority to any party. Prime Minister Mitsotakis called for snap elections in June. These were the first elections where seat bonuses were reinstated. The party list coming first in the elections would receive extra seats in the legislature, making majority government formation easier.

5 ANTARSYA (Mutiny) was forged around 2009 by a group of anticapitalist organizations and comprised around three thousand members. During the 2010–12 period of mass demonstrations, ANTARSYA played a key organizational role and worked with the leftist wing of Syriza (interviews with authors 11, 13, 18, and 19). The "years leading up to elections in 2012 saw a kind of coming together of formerly separate organizations. ANTARSYA itself was also a product of this process. ANTARSYA brought together several organizations of the extra-parliamentary Left that never before had come together to create a united political force" (interview with author 13).

6 ANAMETRISI (Confrontation) is a collective that was formed following splits from ANTARSYA. The 2022 founding conference established that a core goal of ANAMETRISI was to act as a space for a regrouping of activists following years of tensions between leftist organizations in the aftermath of the Syriza experience. There were about 350 to 400 members. Despite its small size, it is a dynamic organization with a large part of its membership coming from the Syriza Youth following the 2015 split. It also has people that came from the Youth wing of NAR—the principal organization within ANTARSYA.

References

Altiparmakis, Argyrios. 2018. "Greece—Punctuated Equilibrium: The Restructuring of Greek Politics." In *European Party Politics in Times of Crisis*, edited by Sven Hutter and Hanspeter Kriesi, 95–117. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108652780.005.

Anria, Santiago. 2018. *When Movements Become Parties: The Bolivian MAS in Comparative Perspective*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108551755.

Anria, Santiago. 2024. "Movimientos sociales y partidos políticos: Apuntes para continuar una agenda de investigación." *Desafíos* 36, no. 1: 1–24. https://doi.org/10.12804/revistas.urosario.edu.co/desafios/a.14193.

Anria, Santiago, Verónica Pérez Bentancur, Rafael Piñeiro Rodríguez, and Fernando Rosenblatt. 2022. "Agents of Representation: The Organic Connection between Society and Leftist Parties in Bolivia and Uruguay." *Politics and Society* 50, no. 3: 384–412. https://doi.org/10.1177/00323292211042442.

Bolleyer, Nicole. 2013. *New Parties in Old Systems: Persistence and Decline in Seventeen Democracies*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Brown, John. 2020. "Neoliberalization, De-democratization, and Populist Responses in Western Europe, the US, and Latin America." *Critical Sociology* 46, nos. 7–8: 1173–87. https://doi.org/10.1177/0896920520927456.

Brown, John. 2022. *Deepening Democracy in Post-neoliberal Bolivia and Venezuela: Advances and Setbacks*. London: Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003262466.

Brown, John. 2024. "Trajectories and Legacies of Outsider Party-Building: The Rise and Fall of Spain's Podemos." *Critical Sociology*, November 30. https://doi.org/10.1177/08969205241302752.

Collier, Ruth Berins, and David Collier. 1991. *Shaping the Political Arena: The Incorporation of the Labor Movement in Latin America*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

della Porta, Donatella, Joseba Fernández, Hara Kouki, and Lorenzo Mosca. 2017. *Movement Parties against Austerity*. Cambridge: Polity.

Etchemendy, Sebastien. 2020. "The Politics of Popular Coalitions: Unions and Territorial Social Movements in Post-neoliberal Latin America (2000–15)." *Journal of Latin American Studies* 52, no. 1: 157–88. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0022216X19001007.

Ferrero, Juan Pablo, Ramón I. Centeno, and Antonios Roumpakis. 2022. "Transitions and Non-transitions from Neoliberalism in Latin America and Southern Europe." *Politics* 42, no. 4: 524–39. https://doi.org/10.1177/02633957211048387.

Hopkin, Jonathan. 2020. *Anti-system Politics: The Crisis of Market Liberalism in Rich Democracies*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780190699765.001.0001.

Hutter, Swen, Hanspeter Kriesi, and Jasmine Lorenzini. 2018. "Social Movements in Interaction with Political Parties." In *The Wiley Blackwell Companion to Social Movements*, edited by David A. Snow, Sarah A. Soule, Hanspeter Kriesi, and Holly McCammon, 322–37. Oxford: Blackwell. https://doi.org/10.1002/9781119168577.ch18.

Katsambekis, Giorgos. 2019. "The Populist Radical Left in Greece: Syriza in Opposition and in Power." In *The Populist Radical Left in Europe*, edited by Giorgos Katsambekis and Alexandros Kioupkiolis, 21–46. London: Routledge.

Katsourides, Yiannos. 2016. *Radical Left Parties in Government: The Cases of SYRIZA and AKEL*. Dordrecht, Netherlands: Springer. https://doi.org/10.1057/978-1-137-58841-8.

Kazamias, Alexander. 2019. "Syriza Betrayed Its Principles—and the Greek People. Its Days are Numbered." *Guardian*, July 5. https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2019/jul/05/syriza-greek-alexis-tsipras-eu-imposed-austerity-polls.

Kriesi, Hanspeter, and Sven Hutter. 2018. "Economic and Political Crises: The Context of Critical Elections." In *European Party Politics in Times of Crisis*, edited by Sven Hutter and Hanspeter Kriesi, 33–52. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108652780.002.

Levitsky, Steven, James Loxton, Brandon Van Dyck, and Jorge I. Domínguez. 2016. *Challenges of Party-Building in Latin America*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9781316550564.

Lupu, Noam. 2016. *Party Brands in Crisis: Partisanship, Brand Dilution, and the Breakdown of Political Parties in Latin America*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9781139683562.

Michels, Robert. 1911. *Political Parties: A Sociological Study of the Oligarchical Tendencies of Modern Democracy*. New York: Free Press.

Offe, Claus, and Helmut Wiesenthal. 1980. "Two Logics of Collective Action: Theoretical Notes on Social Class and Organizational Form." *Political Power and Social Theory* 1, no. 1: 67–115.

Panitch, Leo, and Sam Gindin. 2020. *The Socialist Challenge Today: Syriza, Corbyn, Sanders*. Chicago: Haymarket Books.

Papadopoulos, Theodoros, and Antonios Roumpakis. 2018. "Rattling Europe's Ordoliberal 'Iron Cage': The Contestation of Austerity in Southern Europe." *Critical Social Policy* 38, no. 3: 505–26. https://doi.org/10.1177/0261018318766987.

Papanikolopoulos, Dimitris, and Vassilis Rongas. 2020. "Movement, Party, and Electoral Dynamics: Syriza's Electoral Success as a Movement Effect (2010–2015)." *Greek Review of Political Science* 45, no. 1: 181–203. https://doi.org/10.12681/hpsa.22316.

Petsinis, Vassilis. 2016. "Syriza One Year On: What Happened to the Radical Left Dream in Greece?" *Open Democracy*, January 25. https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/can-europe-make-it/syriza-one-year-on-what-happened-to-radical-left-dream-in-greec/.

Prentoulis, Marina. 2022. *Left Populism in Europe: Lessons from Jeremy Corbyn to Podemos*. London: Pluto.

Przeworski, Adam, and John Sprague. 1986. *Paper Stones: A History of Electoral Socialism*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Silva, Eduardo. 2009. *Challenging Neoliberalism in Latin America*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511803222.

Silva, Eduardo. 2018. "Conclusion: Reflections on the Second Wave of Popular Incorporation for a Post-neoliberal Era." In *Reshaping the Political Arena in Latin America: From Resisting Neoliberalism to the Second Incorporation*, edited by Eduardo Silva and Fernando Rossi, 309–24. Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press. https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv11wjzd.

Sotiris, Panagiotis. 2023. "Kasselakis Ascendant." *Sidecar* (blog), *New Left Review*, October 11. https://newleftreview.org/sidecar/posts/kasselakis-ascendant.

Venizelos, Giorgos, and Yannis Stavrakakis. 2023. "Bound to Fail? Assessing Contemporary Left Populism." *Constellations* 30, no. 3: 290–308. https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-8675.12638.