

## Stockholm Syndrome Social Democracy

David Lizoain, *Social Europe Journal*, 8 January 2015



The recent social democratic playbook is depressingly familiar: first, campaign on a demand stimulus and/or an end to austerity. Second, upon winning (usually by the narrowest of margins), suddenly discover the existence of a series of constraints that make it difficult, if not impossible, to carry out the original programme. Third, muddle through for a few years before capitulating and appointing a technocratic government more palatable to neoliberal tastes. Finally, prepare for a resounding electoral defeat at the hands of frustrated and disappointed voters. This script has already unfolded in Hungary, Greece, and Spain; Francois Hollande's government is well en route to providing another spectacular example.

It does not have to be this way. But the combination of first denying the existence of constraints (e.g. the workings of the ECB, the European fiscal pact, the political majorities in Europe, etc.), only to later justify their existence, is to go from being foolish to being pathetic. Nevertheless, the script being followed by Francois Hollande's former finance minister and current placeholder on the European Commission, Pierre Moscovici, is even worse. This December, Moscovici went to Athens to meddle in Greece's internal affairs in the role of European proconsul and throw up obstacles in the path of Syriza.

His [message](#) consisted of a vigorous defense of the status quo masquerading as paternalistic concern: stay the course of "fiscal responsibility and further structural reforms" or face the consequences. What Moscovici came to say is that the price to be paid for defying Berlin-Brussels-Frankfurt is that they can always make things worse. Hence the threats to expel Greece from the Euro being murmured from the shadows.

The European institutions blackmailing disobedient governments and electorates is unfortunately nothing new; but it is especially distasteful to see the most senior social democrat with an economic portfolio in the Commission engaged in this behaviour.

Moscovici made an almost risible counterfactual argument, suggesting that "without European solidarity Greece would have been in a still worse situation". This is a difficult proposition to swallow, given that if your only friends are the Troika, you have more than enough enemies.

The European institutions blackmailing disobedient governments and electorates is unfortunately nothing new; but it is especially distasteful to see the most senior social democrat with an economic portfolio in the Commission engaged in this behaviour. There could be no clearer manifestation of the intellectual bankruptcy of the viewpoint he represents.

Moscovici counsels political quietism with the jaded, cynical voice of experience: because we tried and we failed, we know that you are better off not trying at all. But he goes even further, because he has begun to identify with those who have taken the possibility of a Social Europe hostage: if you do try, we will actively work to make sure you fail. This amounts to a scandalous capitulation.

Social democrats have learned the bitter lesson that “anti-austerity in one country” will be plagued with difficulties. But it does not follow that the response should be a grudging enforcement of the neoliberal line; this conclusion is totally incorrect. Rather, the political struggle should focus on changing the European institutions that impose such strict constraints, on restructuring excessive debts and carrying out a more egalitarian social agenda.



It's embarrassing to have to point out that progressives across Europe should be rooting for Syriza to succeed, not collaborating with those who wish it to fail. The situation in Greece is making it plain to see that the greatest threat to democracy in Europe is its reigning establishment, whose only answer to a rebellion against austerity will be to attempt to suppress democracy. When an electorate repudiates the status quo, ignoring it will come at a price to the legitimacy of European institutions.

Moscovici represents complicity with a European order of economic stagnation, perpetual austerity, democratic retreat, and creeping racism. This is the present direction of Europe. So long as social democracy is content to play the role of the junior partner in this state of affairs, the situation will continue to get worse. Clearly, it does not help that the strongest actor in European social democracy (the German SPD) is also the strongest support of the biggest obstacle for European social democracy (Angela Merkel).

Continuing to prop up neoliberal conservatives all across Europe in the name of stability and order will only make things politically harder over time, because this centrist alliance is neither delivering in terms of input nor in terms of output legitimacy. The parties of social democracy will continue to shrink. This is a scenario of sleepwalking towards a Craxi-style socialism, content with the perks associated with representing a 10-15% share of the electorate that anyone needs to govern.

The alternative, of course, is to reject the existing structural political subordination and embark on the much more difficult task of helping to build progressive majorities across Europe. The most terrible irony is that Hollande could have been the precursor of a new type of progressive majority in Europe. He managed to win, narrowly, in the midst of an economic downturn with a coalition including communists, greens, liberals and centrists against a President who catered to the wealthy and pandered to the xenophobic right.

Now, Hollande is on track for creating a situation whereby the progressive electorate has to mobilize behind Sarkozy just to stop Marine Le Pen. This is what total failure looks like.