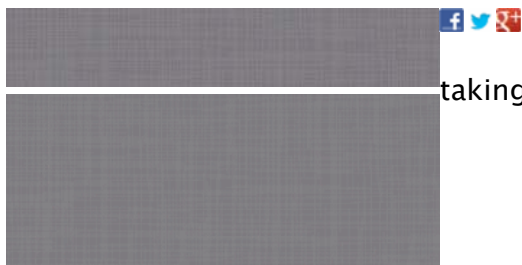


## ΧΡΟΝΟΣ

online περιοδικό με αφητηρία την Ελλάδα

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ΧΡΟΝΟΣ // τεύχος ΕΙΚΟΣΙ ΕΠΤΑ, Ιούλιος 2015



### taking a stand, or why the “no” vote is a “yes” to the idea of europe

Similarities between Heinrich von Kleist’s novella,  
“Michael Kohlhaas” and the Greek situation

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The July 5 referendum is not simply about whether Greek citizens will accept or reject the final, “take it or leave” proposal by the troika for measures to address national debt. In addition, it poses a question that confronts the whole of Europe, namely, is the idea of a single currency, based on the principle of the separation between the management of the currency and national sovereignty, dead or alive?

The “Yes” vote vests the European Commission, the European Central Bank and the International Monetary Fund with the authority to make economic decisions that bypass and ignore the political process. The “No” vote, to the contrary, affirms the separation between currency administration and political decision making.

To understand what is really at stake, an additional factor needs to be considered, namely, the way in which the assertion of national sovereignty is distinct from the possibility of democracy. This distinction is crucial if we are to comprehend what the acceptance or rejection of the proposed measures by the troika entails, as well as why the referendum is not a Greek political affair but rather poses a question about democracy that has a genuinely pan-European significance.

To present the struggle for the assertion of national sovereignty, it is expedient to consider the Greek story leading to the referendum in conjunction with Heinrich von Kleist’s novella, “Michael Kohlhaas” – a favorite of both Marx and Kafka. The story is set in the Reformation. A humble horse dealer, Kohlhaas, has two of his horses unlawfully confiscated. This eventually leads him to a take up arms against the authorities who were unjust toward him. Let me enumerate the most striking similarities between the two stories:

First, the contentious issue unfolds because of the actions of secondary characters, not the proper political authorities. Two men in the service of a local Junker arbitrarily confiscate Kohlhaas’ two horses. In parallel fashion, the Greek story unfolds because of the economic interests of unelected figures – the so-called oligarchs – who had the power to impose their will on elected representatives.

Second, the results of the actions of these shadowy characters exploiting their position are tragic. Kohlhaas’ appeal to have his horses returned is unsuccessful, even leading to the death of his wife. Similarly, the actions of a few oligarchs with their various economic interests and their influence on past governments have led Greeks to unprecedented social misery. This is a modern tragedy.

Third, the reaction to this tragic predicament is a fiery uprising. Kohlhaas sacks the castle of the Junker whose employees stole his horses and takes his fight to the center of power, just like the “aganaktismenoi” (the indignants) brought their fight to Syntagma Square in Athens, in front of the Parliament and the center of power.

Fourth, eventually Luther, as the supreme spiritual authority of his time, intervenes in favor of Kohlhaas, arranging for Kohlhaas to engage with the political and legal authorities, thereby seemingly enjoying natural justice. This is the predicament of Syriza since its election to power five months ago. They arrived in Brussels not unlike Kohlhaas: they were not embraced by the bearers of power, to whom they appeared a bit uncivilized not only for their forthright manner – Kleist describes Kohlhaas as not being afraid to raise his voice to tell the truth, a “crime” against the manners of good society – but also because of their sartorial impropriety of eschewing neck ties.

Fifth, the several pages Kleist devotes to his novella to the legal proceedings are the most pedantic, and consequently the least memorable of the entire novella. This is not unlike the often obscure details of the negotiations between the Greek government and the Troika, compounded by the woeful media reporting in Greece. The reason for this is that practically the entire media is owned and controlled by the oligarchs who were influencing the previous governments that accumulated the Greek debt, and who openly despise Syriza. Unless a Greek uses social media and reads at least English, they have no hope of access to anything but blatantly biased reporting.

Sixth – and certainly most importantly – the two stories are about sovereign power. For Greece, as is well known, it is a matter of whether national sovereignty can assert itself in the face of an unelected bureaucracy operating under neoliberal principles and on a biopolitical paradigm – austerity is, should we need reminding, a way of controlling, disciplining and normalizing populations. In the case of Kohlhaas, he is only permitted back to the legal proceedings because the authorities agree to treat him as a foreign invading power, that is, as a sovereign in his own right.

Significantly, the first five similarities between Kleist’s novella and the Greek situation -- the arbitrariness of

power, the tragic situation, the revolutionary moment, the representation of the rebel, and the “chatter,” as Schmitt calls the liberal procedural emphasis on achieving a compromise – amount to the sovereign right to make decisions. All of them are about the limits, both legal and related to life, of the sovereign power to rightfully make decisions.

So, how does this story about the rights of a sovereign end in Kleist’s novella? The legal process ends with the elector of Saxony handing out the death penalty to Kohlhaas. And yet, this is a triumph of his sovereignty because as he is executed, Kohlhaas is still in possession of a deadly secret, which he uses to extract retribution from the elector of Saxony. Just before being executed on the scaffold, Kohlhaas learns that all his demands – the demands that sum up his sovereign right – have been satisfied. All those who were responsible for the injustices committed against him have been punished, the horses have been restored to his estate, and his children are taken care of by the elector of Brandenburg. At the same time, the moment of his demise by the executioner signals the mental collapse of the elector of Saxony, his sovereign opponent, who cannot bear the weight of the secret he has lost.

Kleist’s point is this: sovereign power triumphs, justice within the purview of sovereignty prevails, and revenge – and is there justice without revenge? – has been extracted, at the very instant that life ceases. The apotheosis of sovereignty is accomplished with the cessation of life. Victory is death.

According to one interpretation of what the July 5 referendum means, the same sovereign end game is about to unfold in Greece. As Greek media commentators have repeatedly – and almost uniformly – stressed since the weekend call for a referendum, the situation can be resolved in either of two unpalatable ways: Either a “Yes” vote means that Greece remains in the Eurozone, the austerity continues without a prospect of ever repaying the sovereign debt, while also leaving the European “experiment” in tatters, resembling a marionette play in which all the strings are held by bureaucrats who flout national sovereignty. Or, a “No” vote leads to a sovereign debt default, with similar results, namely, indefinite misery for the Greek population and the forced exit of Greece from the single currency. (I am saying “forced” exit, since it is a state policy of Syriza that it is not seeking an exit from the Euro, and hence an exit will not be a voluntary act but an expulsion.)

Such an interpretation of the referendum entails a similar death drive to the one exhibited by Kohlhaas. The assertion of sovereignty and its utmost triumphs coincides with its death. The “Yes” vote, in this interpretation, annuls the primary principle of the Euro, that is, the separation of the currency from political power. It vests administrative powers (the EC, the ECB, and the IMF) with political power. The outcome is exactly the same with the “No” vote. Even though the Greeks may assert their opposition to the governmental powers and reaffirm their national sovereignty, the Grexit – the expulsion from the single currency – will confound the principle of the separation of economic management from political authority upon which the single currency was built and thereby signal the death kernel of the idea of Europe as it has been operating since the adoption of the Euro. That’s where the narrative of sovereignty, so brilliantly presented in Kleist’s novella, ends: in both options, the sovereign end game is the death drive of Europe.

This is a false dilemma. The sovereign end game presented in Kleist’s novella and repeated in the above reading of the referendum does not capture the essence of what is asked of the Greek people on July 5. There is another reading of the situation, which emerges only when we distinguish the democratic process from sovereignty. To see this democratic alternative narrative, the referendum on July 5 must be seen as presenting two positions, which do not lead to the same outcome and one of which will prevail. The two positions are as follows:

The “Yes” vote is the continuation of the sovereign game. It is about who holds the right to exercise legal, fiscal and biopolitical control over an entire population. But here the term “population” should *not* be understood as the Greek people. A “Yes” vote means that governmentality has triumphed in Europe, and every national of every Eurozone state is subjectable to regularization and control by unelected bureaucrats and administrators.

By contrast, the “No” vote is tantamount to Europeans rejecting subjection to management, regularization and normalization. From this perspective, the “No” vote, as Stathis Gourgouris rightly stressed a few days ago (see <http://www.chronomag.eu/index.php/s-ggs-p-epsfs.html>), is the genuine pro-European vote. It is the option that keeps open the possibility that administration cannot trump politics in the Union, and that political decision-making still matters. A “No” vote in the referendum is a “yes” to the idea of Europe because it asserts that Greece and every other nation state of the Eurozone do not cede their political authority to unelected technocrats.

Alexis Tsipras’ action to call a referendum introduces an element that Kleist had not countenanced, namely, the possibility that there is an alternative possibility that is not reducible to the death drive of sovereignty, and which presents genuine alternatives between which the people are called upon to decide. The referendum presents the following choice: The “Yes” vote represents the sovereign end game, consisting in the assertion of sovereignty at the same time that the idea the Eurozone is dead because of the collapse of its founding principle – the separation of currency management from the exercise of political authority. By contrast, the “No” vote presents an affirmation of the independence of the political from bureaucratic decisions. This presents a genuine choice and hence an affirmation of the political process – and of Europe.

But who are the people who are called to decide? Sure enough, the vote is given to the citizens of the Greek state, but the question of the referendum of July 5 addresses the people of Europe. Is the European Union to cede the sovereign power of its national member states to an unelected bureaucracy? Or are the people of Europe to retain their political rights? There has never been such a clear-cut “Yes” or “No” presented to Europeans since the introduction of the single currency, and everyone who cares about “Europe,” whatever this may mean, ought to take a stand.

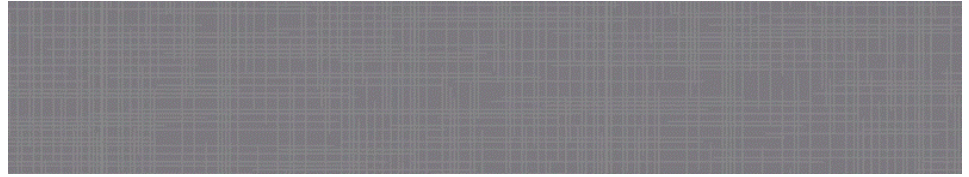
There is a story about the first democratic constitution written by Solon. According to Aristotle in *Athenian Constitution*, Solon instituted that if one does not take a stand in a political dispute, then they will lose their citizenship and they will be expelled from the polis. The spirit of this law is clear: democracy consists in the necessity of taking a stand between two clear and distinct alternatives. It is this possibility that is missing in

Kleist's narrative. It is also this possibility that had been missing in Europe until the call of the referendum last weekend.

With the option to say “No,” the referendum of July 5 asserts democracy within the sovereign power struggle. It is up to the citizens of Greece through their vote, and to the Europeans through raising their voices, to take up their democratic prerogative.



**ΧΡΟΝΟΣ 27 (07.2015)**



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