The Greek Crisis

As has been the case all along, the “Greek crisis” is not merely a Greek affair but a European matter. Nor is it merely an economic question, as European elites in Frankfurt and Brussels would have us believe. Instead it raises a fundamental question about the meaning of the European Union: viz., whether the values of democracy and self-determination are of fundamental importance, or whether, instead, Europe is little more than a desultory economic fiefdom whose policies are arbitrarily determined by the whims of technocratic elites: men and women who enact verdicts and decisions affecting the lives of millions, yet who formulate these verdicts and decisions at a safe remove from the enlightened constraint of democratic accountability. How can it be that in “democratic Europe,” and with such enormous stakes at issue, the demos has, for the most part, been relegated to the sidelines? Thus when the vox populi finally had a chance to be heard in Sunday’s referendum, to its credit, it seized the occasion to emphatically reject the draconian terms of the bailout package, which it correctly perceived as little more than a technocratic diktat.

The current crisis is also about the value of solidarity. As a result of the troika’s heartless austerity policies, the Greek populous has been forced to endure nearly unprecedented levels of human suffering and human misery. With what right can the “haves” of northern Europe effectively condemn its southern tier to conditions of perpetual impoverishment? Where, then, if at all, do the values of compassion and fellow feeling come into play? Or do we now live in a world in which such values count for naught – the sauve qui peut universe described by Thomas Hobbes in which life is “poor, nasty, brutish, and short.”

Since the time to Aristotle, the end of politics – the self-understanding of men and women as zoon politikon – has been to remedy and correct the brutishness of the state of nature, not to aggravate it. How has it come to pass that the current generation of European leaders has managed to forget the most basic lessons of political democracy?

In light of these considerations, the troika’s unwillingness to renegotiate the terms of the Greek debt stands as the twenty-first century equivalent of Marie Antoinette’s dictum: “Let them eat cake!”

Richard Wolin
The Graduate Center
New York