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Critique as a Return

The Tempi Movement

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On Tuesday evening 28.2.2023, a passenger train collided head-on with a freight train in the area of Tempi in Northern Greece. The collision and the resulting fireball killed 57 people, seriously injured 81 and slightly injured 99.

The government immediately blamed the stationmaster, leaving aside structural issues, even though shortly before the accident there were complaints from railway workers about the deterioration of the railway network due to staff cuts, abandonment of infrastructure and lack of safety systems, as well as warnings from competent bodies about the risk of "an incident of maximum severity" on the railway. Despite the warnings, just ten days before the accident, the minister responsible had told parliament that 'it is a disgrace to talk about railway safety'.

From the day after the accident and for about two weeks there were large demonstrations, strikes and school occupations. The huge demonstrations and widespread criticism of the government and the responsibilities of the state apparatus did not affect the outcome
of the elections held three months after the accident: The *Nea Dimokratia* government was re-elected in a landslide. Only on

28.2.2024, one year after the accident, a general strike was held with a large public participation.

It became clear that the handling of the executive and the judiciary was not appropriate to solve the accident, and that the government was trying to cover up the causes. Indicatively: earthworks at the crash site immediately after the accident with reports of pressure on the police by government officials to give permission for the rapid landfilling of the area; destruction of biological material, discouragement or refusal to investigate the material carried by the freight train which is believed to have caused the fireball that killed passengers who escaped the collision, improper judicial actions that discouraged the demand of the victims' relatives to know the truth about the accident.

People's anger was no longer just about the inadequacy of state mechanisms and the lack of security regulations; it was about the demand for truth. The *demos'* demand for truth became a demand for state legitimacy: government accountability and a properly functioning judiciary. The government could no longer enforce its truth. And so, suddenly something happened, a shift from the level of the accident to the level of the social body, a difference that swept over society: the feelings of grief and anger over the accident turned into socio-political discomfort. On 28 February 2025, the probably largest protests ever recorded in Greece were organized. [1]

At the moment when it seemed that the government of *Nea Dimokratia* in coordination with other assemblages (capital accumulation regime, class interests and conflicts, figures of subjectivities, emotional dispositions) had taken control of the political field and determined the strategic field of action of the subjects, huge demonstrations took place with the dominant slogan

"I have no oxygen". And while, a deep and fervent agreement seemed to exist, and indeed does exist, between the rules of economics and politics to which the government obeys and which it in turn defines and the real or imagined aspirations of the population (albeit with the expected asymmetries), the appeal to the lack of oxygen came to inscribe in the relations between government and demos a disagreement, to inscribe the deviation of the governed from the existing rules of the mode of governance.

The Tempi incident was accepted by the left as messianic: capable of upsetting the tightly bound political temporality of the *Nea Dimokratia* government. While the time, the time of the present and especially the time of the future discounted in the present was its own, suddenly the protests dislocated this tight temporality of government policy. But at the same time, the left's relationship to the reactions of the people is puzzling. The discussion was mainly in terms of the left's inability to fill the vacuum created by popular reactions to the government. That is, it was again done in terms of representation. In this note we will attempt to see these reactions as a force that comes from outside politics, in fact from the boundaries of politics, to overwhelm it. But as this force comes from the boundaries of politics it has its consequences in the way it is inscribed in politics.

As shown elsewhere[2] a basic technique of *Nea Dimokratia* governance is the incorporation of stock exchange type practices into administrative action that reconstitutes the mental rules by which we understand the functioning of the state. The reconstruction of the relations between the administration, the economy and the population are a critical factor in its dynamics. But there is something more going on: not only financial practices, but also financial logothetic practices have entered the political for good.

It seems that the government has understood the temporal orientation of our times in relation to the temporality of financial practices: The political logic of the government of *Nea Dimokratia* is the discounting in the present of future relative expectations.[3] This temporal logic is consistent with the temporality of another level: The basic temporal logic of financial practices is the temporality carried by the verb going forward: " 'Going forward (formally, especially business): in the future starting from now. [...] They are always going forward, always looking to release the ball'. [...] Going forward in this context is a spatial (territorial) concept involving (partial) conquest, but more than that, it signals that the present ('now') is contested in a way defined by reference to what awaits 'forward.'" (Bryan 2012: 171).

Going forward for financiers and government, or looking forward as Elon Musk emphatically pointed out in his 20.1.25 speech that raised dust with his Nazi salute. Whether they are sensible neoliberals or 'insolvent' Trumpists, they are here to get the „wheel out of the mud“, dismantle rules and procedures and move forward into the future without protocols, responsibility and guilt. But the power of going forward is not just a communicative tactic; it is linked to the contemporary way in which subjects are implicitly regulated by the very materiality of their lives (the way they live, the way they look for work and work). And at the same time, the movement of going forward carries within it the crisis of time for subjects: it is the pervasive statement "I have no time": "The phrase "I have no time" contains an explosive ambiguity that can become political: it expresses the embodied experience of precarious labour from the perspective of capital. The accumulation of capital today does not simply focus on the exploitation of labour power in the present time [...but] exploits the labour power of lifelong freelancers in such a way that they activate in their labour present

reserves from their future, which are not and will never be protected" (Parsanoglou-Tsianos 2025).

Within this regime of temporality the question arises: How can left critique, stuck in historical memory and stuck in the „just before“ the „last measure“ introduced by the neoliberal government of the day, left critique that is oriented only to any weaknesses or failures of the dominant policies, and not on the strength of their logic insofar as they are articulated by material movements, how can this pinned down and thus oriented left exist in the face of a present that operates by anticipating the future, and in the face of the desire for the future that creates this already discounted future? Thus positioned, the present will always elude us.

It's nothing new for politicians to play with the will, to make promises and talk about an unclear future, but here we have something extra. A complement that makes all the difference. The extra is that this promise of the future does not (only) come at a safe time like the time of an election speech, but is uttered in a condition of precariousness (e.g. regarding the minimum wage or unemployment) or at the moment of an event: a fire on the outskirts of Athens, a femicide in front of a police station, in the case of a crisis. This promise of the future within the immediate time of politics in a moment of crisis is not the old promise of the safe "will" that draws a hypothetical time line from the present to the future (as the future for a loan was simply the slow but assured return of interest), but is the cure for precariousness or bad event through a process of leverage where what is borrowed is a quantity of time: the obligation of accountability for the event in question is deferred through the financing of the present by a promised future. In order to continue the safe course of governmental operations, the present is transformed into an attempted discounting of a future already in the present. The promise of the future is

discounted in the present in order to overcome the crisis of the present. This leverage of the present is its attempted oblivion. The tactic is to always go forward to a future that starts from the event itself in order to leave it behind without reflecting on it: thus social contradictions are resolved through a representation of their future removal. The future of going forward, a dotted and scattered future, ultimately a vulnerable future, functions as a forgetting of the present and produces consensus. As there can be no return to the past, to a quasi-normality, the logic of governance is the flight to a future "without present".

But the advent of an event may show that there is a limit to the logic of going forward. Then crowds may stop thinking in terms of "going forward", then they choose to stay with the event, to return to it, to slow down the discounting.

Thus, in Tempi, the deceitful (deceitful because it aims at the oblivion of the present) verbal and political practice of going forward was short-circuited. Initially, the government again attempted to look past the simply unfortunate event of the death of 57 people into the future: by blaming one person (the stationmaster), by denying administrative and political responsibility, by protecting the private company Hellenic Train (the company that is the main provider of rail passenger and freight transport in Greece), by attempting to divert the investigation, etc. The government was trying to pull towards the future, but it seemed that this future was not the future of going forward, but a future it was trying to bring by simply covering up the present of the accident. In Tempi, the public reaction short-circuited the government's future of going forward by demanding another present and another future (to the extent that this present could be made to last).

This other temporality imposed by the masses required the continuous persistence of the questioning of the accident. In the face of the government's amnesiac flight into the future, the governed population chose the constant return to it. This return is not fixation, it is the question of the present. Gradually, and increasingly as the investigations progressed, it did not allow the government to escape into a future that would leave the event aside. Suddenly, it was time for the government to be criticized. For what is a critique but a return? A constant return to the incident, the persistent questioning about it. Critique as a return is the antithesis of the government's going forward. A return that is not a settling down, not a return to the past, but a staying with the problem of the present. [4]

So, Tempi is not the fixation on 28.2.2023, but the question of what is happening now. Tempi is the only moment when the masses reacted to the regime of truth as it has been shaped after the transformations that have taken place through two successive crises in recent years (financial crisis, pandemic). The only event in which the masses refused the truth as it was attempted to be defined by the regime. It may be that this denial of the validity of the government's discourse is only related to an isolated event, it may be that this denial of the government's truth is not related to the critique of the coordinates, the foundations of the regime's truth as it has been pronounced for so many years.[5] And it may even be that this denial is not the condensation of various heresies and latent denials, but it is a denial of government-truth so population-wide and intense that it shatters the power of government discourse.

If the political temporality of neoliberal governments is that of going forward, and the political temporality of metafascism is also the invocation of the immediate cure of "evil", the politics of the

demos, on the contrary, is the slow temporality of politics that carries with it return and duration.

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[1] Kaki Bali, "Trainwreck of Tempi: Greece demonstrates for justice" (Rosa Luxemburg Foundation 3.3.2025), available at: https://www.rosalux.de/news/id/53166?fbclid=IwY2xjawIz_nFleHRuA2FlbQIxMAABHRVjrvQiIz1efxK20LcitS1oX8lZrsQYTGnpCw1KEy6uBoFw.

[2] Emmanouilidis (2023) "Power, public administration, population: the political rationality of the New Democracy government", *Theseis*, 164: 17-39 (In Greek), available at: http://www.theseis.com/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=1743:memmanou164&catid=191&Itemid=

[3] Two examples: (a) In the great fires of Marathon, in the summer of 2024, Prime Minister Mitsotakis said: "We have proven as a government that in what we say we are very consistent. We are here to heal the wounds, to learn from our mistakes, but also to capitalise on the important steps forward that have been taken. [...] Political life has not managed to escape the toxicity and polarisation that does not suit the problems of citizens, but the challenges are too great to keep looking for people and people responsible. What is needed is to be able to make better use of the knowledge, technology and expertise at our disposal".
(b) In June 2024 a femicide occurred outside a police station in Athens. The Prime Minister stated: "It is about trauma. Some have been bleeding from within the core of the state almost since its inception. We owe it to the public to eradicate pugnacity from the public service. The battle with the deep state has a long way to go. When a girl is murdered outside a police station we bow our heads and say we must do more. [...] We will persevere. Until we all get over our bad selves."

[4] The issue is complex and interesting, but for the purposes of this article let us just note that "in the eighteenth century the

primary meaning of 'revolution' was the return of previous forms of existence" (Ozouf 1989: 806). Revolution as return prompts the thought that revolutionary movement is not just a vertical movement in time. It is a punctuated but serial movement, a movement in series of singular points that at times extend to other levels of series, a movement with an indeterminate time horizon until these series of singular points occupy space (Deleuze) or in Marx's words 'until return becomes impossible'.

[5] For a difference between the two denials of the validity of truth rules, see Butler (2001).