Yanis Varoufakis & Grace Blakeley: Why Everything Feels Broken

This transcript may not be 100% accurate due to audio quality or other factors.

Yanis Varoufakis (YV): Hello, hello, hello. Welcome on behalf of DiEM25, the transnational radical pan-European movement. Welcome to our Greek party's offices. MeRA25 is a Greek party. I'm Yanis Varoufakis, and I have the great pleasure of introducing you to author, economist, and I believe highly accomplished surfer…

Grace Blakeley (GB): Definitely not highly accomplished.

YV: Grace Blakeley.

GB: Thank you so much for having me.

YV: She actually has been elected recently to the coordinating collective, the coordinating committee of DiEM25. And we're here because the DiEM25 collective is meeting in Athens to plan ahead, and we thought we should have a chat. So welcome Grace.

GB: Thank you.

YV: And I'm going to kickstart it by asking you a very broad and painful question. What keeps you up at night during these days?

GB: So right now, I think it's a similar answer to most people on the left, and I would say a lot of people in the world right now – what is the big political issue that's keeping you awake at night? It's got to be Gaza. Even though we've got allegedly a ceasefire now, which Israel is obviously repeatedly breaking, it's not answering any of the fundamental issues that drove the genocide in the first place, that have driven decades of apartheid, of colonization, expulsion, all of these horrendous things that have been going on for such a long time. And just the death and destruction and chaos that has been played out in front of us over the last several

years has been horrific to watch. So that's been something that's something you can't stop thinking about. Like, you know, you're sitting at home on your phone looking at these reels, looking at these videos of unparalleled chaos, and it is impossible for anyone with an ounce of empathy not to respond to that. So that's very much at the forefront of my mind right now.

But then if I think, okay, allegedly we've got a ceasefire, what if the genocide doesn't stop. It's not going to stop, is it, for as long as Israel is occupying Gaza, but you know, stops being in the headlines. What are kind of these other issues that are lying behind this? Obviously, the climate crisis is another massive thing that's on my mind a lot at the moment, in terms of something else that's already causing mass devastation, mass chaos, mass disruption. It's already killing people all over the world, albeit in not such a direct way as what we're seeing in Gaza, but it's leading to the loss of livelihoods, it's leading to extreme weather events that are killing people, destroying crops, driving up prices, making life unaffordable for so many people. And the more I think about this, going from one problem to another to another, the point I always end up at, the thing that really concerns me and scares me, is really the collapse of our democracy. And the reason I always get there is because when I'm sitting here worrying about Gaza or worrying about climate breakdown, I know I'm not alone in worrying about those things. I know that all of my friends, all of my family, from the most conservative to the most left-wing, in one way or another, are devastated at what they've been seeing, the chaos that has been engulfing the Middle East that is engulfing our planet. They're really, really concerned about it.

And yet, our politics doesn't reflect that concern. Our politics does not reflect the rage that people feel towards an established elite that has ignored these problems, that has ignored rising cost of living, that has imposed austerity, that has taken us very nearly to war. And the kind of disappointment and disillusionment and disempowerment that people feel as a result of that is really affecting me. It affects all of the young people I speak to a lot because they think, I'm devastated about climate breakdown, I'm devastated about Gaza, but I feel like I can't do anything about it. And it all comes back to this question of how we connect this mass popular anger and outrage and devastation that people feel at all of the crises that are engulfing us right now – how do we translate that into a powerful political movement capable of shaking our elites until they realize they have to do something about it? So that I think for me is at the core of what I'm worried about right now. It's how we translate rage and anger into democratic change. Because if we don't do it, the far right absolutely will.

YV: Yes, and to some extent, even when our rage becomes evident and feels the strict, like during the last two years of the genocide in your country in the United Kingdom Kingdom, you had massive demonstrations in support of Palestinians and against the genocide. And yet, yes, it did shift the needle because Keir Starmer was forced to show that he did something. But look at what happened when he showed that he did something, which is recognizing formally the state of Palestine, which is not a bad thing, except that the only reason why he did it was so that there would never be a state of Palestine, because if he cared about seeing a state of Palestine come into being, he would first help end the genocide by stopping the constant shipment of arms to Israel. And then even that small gesture goes up in a puff of

smoke a week later, when Donald Trump, along with Tony Blair, let us not forget, announce a plan essentially for a company owned by Trump and managed by Blair to annex the Gaza Strip – essentially putting a tombstone on any two-state solution, on any punishment of those responsible for the genocide. In other words, it was a great gift to Netanyahu. So even when we mobilize hundreds of thousands of people, millions of people, and we shift the needle, as long as the Keir Starmers of the world are controlling the levers of power, they distort even the small gestures they make into weapons that essentially are sent to Israel.

GB: Yeah, and I think in some ways the problem goes even deeper than that because I worry about even having a – and you will be very familiar with this problem, Yanis – even when you do manage to elect a progressive leader, someone who has integrity, you think, someone who has come up through a movement, and they enter into the institutions of a capitalist state, they are absorbed by and kind of commandeered by that system. And this is something that I think Marxists have been talking and writing about for a very long time. I'm very familiar with this debate as it obtains to the British state, right? Which has for centuries been the locus of empire. And I don't just mean kind of like formal political colonization, I mean the kind of fusion of public and private power in service of the projection of imperial power abroad through corporate power through state power, going all the way back to the East India Company. So this project of imperialism is integral to the way that the British state works. We're seeing this now very clearly with the stance on Gaza.

And even if you get a progressive leader into those institutions, those institutions are so powerful. And one of my favorite, other than you, Greek Marxist theorists is Nicos Poulantzas, who wrote very effectively about the nature of state power and how the state – which is not something that's kind of limited to formal state institutions, but these political institutions that underpin capitalist societies and which come to suffuse everything, suffuse our political parties, suffuse our movements, our education are really social relations, much like capital itself. So when we live in a society in which there is such a great imbalance of power between the people and those who own and control the means of production, that shapes what goes on within the state. And it means that even if you get a powerful political leader coming into those institutions, they are quickly captured and pushed into impossible choices and end up consistently favoring the interests of capital and of imperialism, even if they want to do the right thing. Which is again, we're worrying about these issues, and I'm going round and round in my head of thinking all the way back to Ralph Miliband worrying about these questions in like the 1950s and 60s – is there a possibility of building parliamentary socialism from within the British state? And that's what I'm worried about right now, because I'm thinking how can we build a movement powerful enough to take on those archaic, arcane institutions and really put meaning into the term democracy?

YV: And prevent its leaders from being lured by exorbitant power; and I would also add by exorbitant powerlessness. While you were speaking, my mind raced ten years back when I was in government for a very short space of time, because I saw exactly what you were describing, which I also knew because I had read Poulantzas, I had read Ralph Miliband. I always have to add this in case people confuse him with his hapless children. And I

remember the personal experience of it. I remember entering these rooms where intimate discussions were taking place, and I will never forget two conversations in particular. One was with somebody who had met me in order to be of assistance to me. He was not an adversary during that period. It was a very brief moment when the two of us could actually work together because we had a common goal; Larry Summers, the former Treasury Secretary of the United States under Clinton, who was responsible effectively for unleashing Wall Street to go crazy and berserk, the result being the 2008 collapse. But when I was in government for that short space of time, he recognized that what Brussels and Frankfurt were doing to Greece – a huge austerity and was in the end going to deliver a deflationary shock to the United States. So he and I were allied for a very brief moment. And I remember we met around midnight in a Washington hotel at a bar over a glass of whiskey. And we discussed strategies by which to avert this austerity program for Greece. And towards the end, he put a question to me. I've written about this in the book, but nevertheless, you reminded me of that. He asked me after making a small introduction to the topic, he said: "Look, Yanis, there are two kinds of people who are elected to power. There are the ones who are interested in being insiders, and the ones who want to stay outsiders. If you want to be an outsider, then the system will vomit you out, spew you out, he said. And you will maintain your ethics and do your thing out there, and you'll be irrelevant. If you want to stay inside, there's a golden rule. You never cross other insiders. And you try to make small marginal changes within, as long as the rest of the insiders tolerate. Which one of the two are you?"

Now, I'm not going to tell you what I answered, it doesn't matter. But you can see how the system introduces you to a mechanism which is supremely powerful. It can deliver gigantic returns to you personally, but as long as you accept your powerlessness – so you're not lured by power, you're lured by powerlessness to be part of the powerful thing. Similarly with Christine Lagarde, who was the managing director of the IMF at the time. She said to me that she agreed with everything I was saying, which is shocking. It's shocking, you know, you come off the street as a demonstrator, Marxist leftist, and she says, you know, your analysis is completely right. What we're doing cannot work. What the system is doing cannot work. But your reputation, she said, and your career will depend on you accepting that we have invested so much political capital in this thing that can't work that you can't go against. You've got to accept it. So those two perspectives by Summers and Lagarde essentially boils down to what you were saying: how does the movement make sure that its representatives, once they get elected and they go into these rooms, will not be lured by this and will stay connected to the movement. That that for me is –

GB: That's the big structural question. What you were talking about then just made me think, though, about the kind of core moral framework of liberalism, which, if you think about it, going all the way back to the earliest forms of liberalism, it was always connected to this very like rationalist utilitarian ethics, which you see now crop up in the way that anyone in these positions of power justifies their actions. Because something I've been thinking about a lot recently is in this era where we have the collapse of liberalism and the growth in power to an extent of the left, but to much greater extent that of the far right, liberals have always clung to this idea of their kind of like moral rectitude. This is why the move from the left was so

threatening to them. This is why, in the Corbyn years, for example, journalists who had built up platforms as the kind of progressive liberal moral consciousness of the nation became so angry at the existence of the left because it challenges their moral rectitude, basically. It challenges the idea that they're the ones that are the kind of arbiters of right and wrong and are acting as the conscience internally of this system, saying, yes, you know, it's bad that there's child poverty, but it is also true that the government has to balance the books and ultimately we need to come to some sort of conclusion, recognizing there are constraints on our ability to act, and this is what we should do within the system.

So the whole moral framework of liberalism rests on this idea that they are good people who want to do the right thing in the context of lots of constraints, and their framework for understanding how to operate in terms in those institutions is this utilitarian framework of the greatest good for the greatest number. And so that means if I have to make a bunch of deeply unethical decisions, compromise all of my values to get into a room where I might be able to make a decision that might at some point have a marginal positive impact on the rest of society, then that's what I'll do. And they find the moral outlook of the left, which is not just based on this kind of limited, rationalistic utilitarian logic, it's based on things like solidarity, like an understanding of the importance of collective power, of resistance. It's much more kind of socially rooted, much more organized and based on mutual recognition and collaboration. They find it so scary and so threatening. Because if you get to the end of your career and you are the Larry Summers or the Christine Lagarde or the Tony Blair or the David Cameron or whoever, and your legacy is basically you spent your entire career saying, I'm gonna get more and more power so that I can do the right thing, only to have done so much evil – that's terrifying for them. They have to believe that we are outsiders who just want to stay outside of the halls of power, don't care about influencing politics, don't care about really doing anything right, because that's the only way that they can retain their own sense of self.

YV: I have a slightly different perspective.

GB: Please.

YV: It's the same perspective but slightly differentiated by the experience of the last 15 years since the 2008 crisis. Now there's no doubt; look, nobody believes that they're evil. I'm sure he thought he was a good man. I'm sure. I mean nobody – in the same way that most people who are racist don't think they're racist. They believe that, you know, those people are Chinese. What can I do? I was thinking back while you were speaking about a character from mid 20th century Greek history. He was a general of the Greek army when the fascists invaded. He was part of the military effort which led to Greek victory for a few months. I mean, we defeated the Italian fascists. But then the Nazis came all the way, they had to go over Yugoslavia to finish the job. And that guy, who was a general of a national army that was successful for a few months, essentially goes over to the Germans and becomes the first Quisling, the first appointed Prime Minister of Greece. And I always am interested in how do these people justify themselves. So I read some of his memoirs, and he was actually justifying it by saying, you know, the lesser evil. Okay, we lost. The Germans were going to

take over Greece, we would have a Nazi occupation, they would appoint somebody to do their dirty job for them. So I better do it because if I can save one person – this is the utilitarian logic that you were referring to. So these centrists agree with you. The deeper the crisis of capitalism and capital accumulation becomes, the nastier the policies that they need to implement in order to preserve the order of things, the capitalist order, the bourgeois order. So like Richard III, they add one crime to another in order to get away with the previous crimes that they committed. And at some point they are in hell.

Up until now, your narrative and my narrative are exactly the same. My slight differentiation comes in the form of the observation that unlike Richard III, who at some point welcomed his demise, right? Welcomed his denial. And those people cross the threshold when they don't give a damn. And all moral judgements are totally sidelined and in the end, they've reached a point. I've seen that in Brussels, I've seen it in Frankfurt. I'm seeing it now with Keir Starmer in the United Kingdom. There is no moral void they will not jump into headlong. Without the care in the world, without even existentialist angst about what they're doing. I think that Thatcher had morals. She had their own morals, but she had principles. She wouldn't cross her own red lines, she would negotiate them, but she wouldn't cross them with the ease that these people now. But what intervened between now and then is our generation's 1929 in 2008. And I think the world changed so much that liberalism has been completely undermined by the liberals who effectively don't give a damn about liberal values anymore. And so yeah, I think we need to change the narrative and become more radical and more militant against these people because they don't give a damn.

GB: That is so right and so interesting because it makes me think of two things. The first one was Geoff Mann, a while ago, wrote this book *In the Long Run We Are All Dead.* And his whole idea was that Keynesianism, Keynes' whole outlook, was if capitalism collapses, civilization will go with it. Ergo, to save civilization, we need to be able to save capitalism. So his whole idea about Keynes was that Keynes wasn't particularly committed to capitalism itself. He was very committed to the idea of a kind of Western civilization.

YV: Which he identified with market societies and the freedom of capital to be owned by the very few. He didn't mind that.

GB: Yeah, no, of course. But his argument was that the actual attachment was to basically the idea that he was saving the world, right? He was saving civilization. It was like après moi le deluge, après capitalism, chaos. And the whole Keynesian vision, which was like, okay, we need to introduce these constraints on the operation of the free market – which we can get into – that that is a project about saving civilization from the potential threat caused by capitalist crises. So mitigating the impact of those crises, you're therefore saving civilization, which gives Keynesianism and now liberalism, because they're so intertwined, this kind of millenarian vision. And ends up, as you say, creating these characters who think that they are literally saving the world. And the second thing it made me think was that there's this observation, and I remember my mum telling me about this at the time actually – she was an organizational psychologist – and she observing people like Blair and Bush and other people, pointed me towards these studies on what was then called the hubris syndrome. And a lot

more research has been done into this, which is the impact of power on the brain. And they had basically found that a lot of characteristics associated with kind of like impulse control, empathy, they all decline the longer you're exposed to power. So people's brains fundamentally change such that they don't reason the same, they don't empathize the same, they become much more narcissistic, they see themselves as kind of the center of the universe. And you see this with political leaders. It literally, literally does, in like very clear and obvious ways. And you know, Blair, I think is the paradigmatic case of that. When you look at him and the way he talks about himself, if you even contrast that with when he was first running for office, it's completely different. It's kind of scary. And I worry again about the impact that that has on leaders on the left as well, because we're not immune.

YV: Absolutely. Thank you for mentioning that. Because we have seen it so many times. I have to tell you that I've never felt more asphyxiated than when I was in government, in a radical left-wing government, watching the manner in which an illusion of power – we didn't really have any power – we had I'm now going to quote a Tory former chancellor: "We were in office but not in power", even though we were not in power, that semblance of the illusion of power got to people's heads. And I saw that. I saw how they distanced themselves from the movements that had put us there - without who we would never have been in those offices. And how they decided that, in a Quisling kind of way, they will overthrow the people because this is what is the lesser evil. This notion of the lesser evil which is being used in order to allow yourself to become entrenched in power against the interest of the people who put you in the office. And you see this even in small groups of leftists, even anarchists, the lure of power is something that really needs to be fought against. And we haven't worked out exactly how we can do that in our movements, except to say that we should only trust people to represent us who are very reluctant at doing it. If everybody really loves the idea of leading, I think they should be disqualified immediately. So, how do you combine ambition?

GB: It's hard, right? Because you then get people who say they don't want to lead who genuinely don't want to lead. And putting yourself out there and taking up a position of leadership requires a lot of energy and effort and intensity, as you well know. And it's really hard striking that balance.

YV: So how do you combine idealism with skills but without the ambition?

GB: I don't know if you can.

YV: But that's what we need.

GB: My view is that we need to be able to create institutions that can contain the ambition on the one hand and which also are built on trust on the other hand. That second part is I think the hardest part. Because you can kind of build democratic institutions. It's really hard, but you can build democratic institutions that are good at holding the people at the top to account and subjecting them to pressure or removing them if they get out of line. But the hardest thing I think to do, and I saw this definitely with Corbynism, is to create institutions that are simultaneously democratic and also in which people can trust each other. Because the

moment that that trust goes, and we're seeing this right now with your party, right? The moment that trust goes is the moment that you then start...

YV: Your party was innovative because the trust left before the party was created. We are laughing, but we should be crying.

GB: I know, it's depressing. I think the reason that the trust is important isn't just like it allows you to work together to make good decisions. It's that as soon as the trust goes, you then start projecting all of the worst possible motivations onto your opponent, i.e. the person you're supposed to be working with. And you then start telling yourself, everything I'm doing is justified so that I can get the power, so that that bad person can't get the power.

YV: And the movement flourishes.

GB: Exactly.

YV: Well, since we are here in the context of DiEM25, let me share with you, because you're new to this organization; we have been worrying about this regarding our movement from its inception from ten years ago. Because you're utterly correct. You need institutional structures that encourage that or discourage the concentration of power and the exorbitant power of some. So there are two institutional dimensions that we have introduced, one is that all decisions that matter are made by all member votes. So our coordinating committee or collective organizes, coordinates, and then when important decisions need to be made, they are not made by representatives, by elected representatives, but they put out there after consultation to an all-member vote. We call them AMVs. That's one institution that we have created for that. The second institution we've created is, we call it the validation council. And that is a group of a hundred people who are selected at random, like a jury system through sortition. And they validate or not validate decisions of the coordinating collective. And they change every six months. So there is a rotation system. So the combination of an ancient Athenian jury system with all member votes, that's our solution to doing it. I don't know what do you think about...

GB: I think it's great. And like what I was thinking when you were talking about that was how in some senses how much truer that type of system is to the like philosophical origins of liberalism than the kind of just dysfunctional democracy that we have today.

YV: Liberalism was never meant to be a democracy. This is a mistake we make. The true blue original liberals were anti democrats. They did not believe in democracy. John Stuart Mill did not believe in democracy.

GB: Yeah, well, I mean, this is why I'm talking about it in like a philosophical-like way, right? Because you know, when you're talking about...

YV: Well there is philosophers against democracy.

GB: True. Well, okay. Lots of liberal theory you can trace back to – you know, for example, Condorcet's theorem, which is where you get the jury system to begin with, when you get lots of people from lots of different perspectives and you put them in the room and you get them to come to a decision, it's much more likely statistically to be a good decision than if you just get, you know, like that if you have fewer people. And you know, that as a way of kind of mediating disputes was quite important to liberal theory, certainly in terms of like jurisprudence, for example. But also, you know, you're right to say that liberalism was always anti-democratic because the vision of democracy was always based on exclusion in certain ways, right? It was always like...

YV: I mean if all you need to do is read the Federalist papers, that are the precursor of the American Constitution. It's all about how to keep the many, the hoi polloi, out of decision making. How to get their consent without giving them the power to decide. It's explicitly. It's written down, it's there. It's not just that they didn't want women and slaves to have the vote, which of course they didn't, but they were even when it came to white men with the vote, it was all about how to make sure that the majority is not ruling.

GB: It was always justified in utilitarian terms, wasn't it? It was like, how do we get the best kinds of decisions? How do we make sure that people are making the right decisions, i.e., respecting property, respecting the kind of limited understanding of rights that they had? And that has always been based on the idea that you would exclude irrational people from participating in the decision-making process. So colonized people and women and...

YV: From the beginning of liberalism, from Thomas Hobbes all the way to Locke and David Hume and even to Bentham and so on. The whole point about liberalism was to elevate the image of the autonomous individual, who's always of course a man. A bourgeois man. They don't say that. It's the autonomous individual, the idealized rational economic man, homo economicus, and say, okay, if he were rational – it is a he – what would he have decided? That is a very different question to what does the majority want. And I mean because we're in Athens, let me say make this point, that people make a huge mistake in thinking that there is any connection between ancient Athenian democracy and Western liberal capitalist democracy. The ancient Athenian democracy was a very interesting example, okay, slaves and women only, and metics, migrants were exempted, but at least the majority who were the poor ruled during those fifty years. It was a very short lived experiment. But the liberal democracies that we're talking about have their origins, not in ancient Athens, but in the Magna Carta. Which was a charter of the slave owners. So it was all about how do the lords preserve their autonomy from the king and their right to have the masses under them. And it's not the same thing.

GB: I think we are kind of picking up on an inherent tension within liberalism right now that also relates to the links between like liberal theory and the material context in which they emerge, right? Which was, you know, liberalism and capitalism kind of end up going along like that. And you see these contradictions within liberal thought between the more let's say kind of, I don't want to say utopian, but more kind of democratic visions of what a liberal society would look like; like on the extreme, someone like Rousseau, for example, through to

a much more limited understanding of what democracy can and should look like. And what's interesting is the way in which that changed with neoliberalism, right? And Quinn Slobodian is probably the person who's written about this most effectively, like the contradictions in the neoliberal brain about the importance of democracy, and how essentially there was this kind of transactional approach adopted by neoliberals towards democratic processes, whereby, they would claim that capitalism is about freedom and therefore goes along with free markets and democracy. But because they elevated the idea of the free market as a set of institutions that should be completely outside of democratic control, ahead of any nominal liberal respect for people's freedom or integrity or whatever, they were very, yeah, like transactional in terms of how they treated different neoliberal regimes; so like Pinochet is fine because he's protecting the free market. But also the default position of a liberal capitalist society is a nice democracy where everyone gets what they want, like England or America, right? And what's really fascinating about where we end up now is as you see those democratic institutions that exist in capitalist societies eroded by the contradictions of capital, by inequality, by corruption, by all of the problems that blight our democracies today, that much more assertive anti-liberal conservative strain of thought that's always been kind of present somewhere within that neoliberal way of thinking is really coming to the fore. And there's this idea of – you see this in the weird kind of like paleo-libertarian Peter Thiel libertarian billionaires of like, we need to protect capitalism. And they've kind of done away with the idea of the free market now, right? They don't really care about that so much.

YV: I think they've done away with the idea of capitalism even.

GB: Well yeah, I mean I think we disagree on that possibly.

YV: Now it's the algorithm.

GB: Yeah, yeah.

YV: You see, I agree with everything you said, but I would put it from a different perspective. If you compare a liberal like Keynes, whom we talked about before, with a neoliberal like Hayek or Friedman or these people, it was a fundamental difference. The fundamental difference is that like Adam Smith, like David Ricardo, the classical liberals, John Stuart Mill, so did Keynes, think of the market as a remarkable mechanism that was in our service. He thought it was a better mechanism than other, you know, a command system and all that. But for them, the objective was the satisfaction of human needs. And the market was a means, a means to an end that could have gone wrong, like a machine and malfunction. And then when it malfunctions, we intervene. That's Keynes, right? And John Stuart Mill and so on. The neoliberals have elevated the market to a deity that can never be faulted. That even when, like that God, even when children die of leukemia at the age of four, God must know better. So even when the market destroys the planet, creates poverty, it may be bad, but it's the best of all possible worlds, a Panglossian kind of thing. This is neoliberalism, which it's neither new nor liberal, we know that. And the only reason, as far as I'm concerned, that it prevailed in the 1970s is because of the end of Bretton Woods, the end of the planned capitalist two decades after the second world war, it was the ideology which was necessary in

order to unleash the the financial sector and to unleash financialization. So it's essentially the ideological cloak of financialization. Now we have a new phase. I associate this with the rise of what I call cloud capital with algorithmic capital. And people like Peter Thiel have adopted, they've moved beyond. They are not going to defend the market as an infallible deity. For them, it's the algorithm. And the algorithm surely knows better, and AI is going to save us as long as they own it. So again, you know, as that brings us back to Marx, the question is not who knows what, the question is who owns what.

GB: Yeah, I mean I agree. And I think...

YV: We go back to the original project of socializing. The means of production exchange and now of manipulating other people's behavior because this is what cloud capital is.

GB: Yeah, no, I mean, I definitely agree with a lot of that. I mean, it made me think of why I wrote my book, Vulture Capitalism, right?, which was to try and expose the huge gap that exists between liberal philosophy and political theory and neoliberal philosophy and political theory as a way of justifying a market system and the existence of capitalism, which pretty much nowhere throughout the history of its existence has ever been a truly free market system, even according to what the neoliberals would consider to be a free market system, because the role of the state is so profoundly important in maintaining legitimacy, in supporting production, in creating the conditions for market exchange, in bailouts and whatever you want. Like you cannot have capitalism without a strong and muscular and interventionist state. And equally, we know from Marx that you inevitably get this tendency towards concentration and centralization over time, which means that capitalist economies also end up looking very concentrated, not very free market systems. But I guess the fascinating thing now is that the gloves are kind of off. And with someone like Peter Thiel, for example, who is just like monopolies?! Fine: like it's good actually. There's no attempt to justify capitalism with reference to this much longer standing political tradition that's given it legitimacy, which is about the importance of the market as a way of organizing society. It's about the value of freedom, right? And like the individual capacity to make their own decisions or whatever. And instead, we have this almost like, you know, I would say Peter Thiel's whole framework, and this is true of a lot of neoliberals, is almost like I am the platonic ruler of this society. I am the philosopher king.

YV: Yes, the philosopher king.

GB: And people just need to defer to me because I am so much wiser and so much better. And if asked, they'll be like...

YV: Because he's a philosopher king who doesn't want the polis [*Editor's note: an ancient Greek city-state, a self-governing community that included both a central urban area and its surrounding territory*]. Right? He doesn't believe in the polis. He wants you know, to create floating islands in the Pacific so that there is no polis.

GB: But that's the contradiction as well, right? Because let's say, you know, they want this like amazing society where there's like, let's say, no people involved in the production process and AI makes all the decisions and robots produce everything. Their power, their sense of self, their sense of identity, their importance in the world, is derived from their capacity to control people and to own more things than other people and to control what other people do in the production process. So in their fantasized world, they like remove the foundations for their own importance. And I think this is a really interesting part – something that we need to dig into a little deeper in terms of this like paleo-libertarian philosophy, which is like the centrality of domination in their way of thinking, even if it's not foregrounded when they talk about it, their whole worldview and it extends to the far right as well.

YV: But that's where it converges with fascism, right?

GB: Yeah, exactly that's what I was gonna say.

YV: Because our 1929, I insist, took place in 2008, and the result is we have a postmodern version of the mid war period and you have this coalescence. On the one hand, the Le Pens and the Orbans and the Farages and the Tommy Robinsons and you know fascists of the world that managed to unite, unlike us of the left, and this is what we change with DiEM25, and on the other hand, you have in the same way that the Agnellis and the Krupps of the 1920s and 30s, the great industrialists coalesced with the fascists and created the military industrial complex that begot the Second World War. Now you have big tech and fascism meeting with Trump being the, not philosopher king, but the big good king overseeing all this. So the question is let's wrap it up because we could be...

GB: Oh no, I feel like we've already just gotten started, Yanis.

YV: Because you know, we're here on behalf of the DiEM25. And our movement failed to catch, I mean using surfing language, the wave of discontent of the mid 2010s across Europe and in the United Kingdom. We failed with Corbynism in the United Kingdom, we failed here in Greece, we failed in Spain with Podemos, we failed, failed, failed. And the result is that without the left offering an alternative, the discontent is harvested by the fascists across the West. So what do we do?

GB: I have a theory about why we failed. And one of the reasons, I think one of the kind of foundational reasons that we failed to capture that wave of discontent, and I think it relates a lot to the success of the neoliberal project in terms of transforming our identities as people. Because the whole Thatcherite, you know, neoliberal project in general was really, and I argue this in the book, it wasn't about free markets, it was about breaking up collective power and asserting a very rigid understanding of like individual agency, which meant you are a little isolated atom competing in a system, in a game that we have designed for you. It is your job to maximize your utility, to build up a set of assets and to kind of insulate yourself and protect yourself and compete within this market to get to the top. And it was so successful, right? In so many different ways. If you think about the shift from, you know, the idea of yourself as a worker, which no one really thinks of anymore, to the idea of yourself as an

entrepreneur, which everyone wants to be an entrepreneur, or from someone who participates in a community to now you're an individual household. That's what economists talk about us. We're households, we have a stock of assets and liabilities, we manage our balance sheets. You know, we're not citizens, we're consumers of public services. All of these ways of thinking about ourselves become so deeply embedded, not just in like, how we talk, but how we relate to each other, that it has become, and I notice this so much when I go and talk to just young people, it's become so difficult to imagine what collective agency even looks like. That's, I think, the big shift.

YV: Okay. So what do we do about it?

GB: Well we got to...

YV: Because you are very good with diagnosis.

GB: Yeah, no, you're right. And this is kind of what I'm writing about right now actually, 'cause it's really hard. Yeah. And the far right takes advantage of it, right? Because they say...

YV: Oh they say, you know, burn the Muslim, burn the Jew, burn the other, burn the trans...

GB: But it's deeper than that, right?

YV: Yeah, the easy answers.

GB: Yeah, but it's even deeper than that, right? Because it's come together to protect your community. That's like the fundamental appeal of it. It's like you're part of this thing, this nation, this community, and you need to work with other people to protect it.

YV: Except they don't even do that.

GB: Of course. They don't.

YV: They talk about it to drum up hatred. But they talk a good game about protecting communities, but they do absolutely nothing to protect communities and when they get power they will unleash even more austerity that will decimate their own communities.

GB: I agree.

YV: Well, so what do we do? We probably won't get to the answer.

GB: Well, I want to give you like my speculative answer, which is that we need to focus a lot more on the left at building that sense of belonging and collective agency, right? And so that looks like prioritizing movement building in community organizing, renters' unions, saving local libraries, whatever, alongside organizing in the workplace and like being very tactical about the types of organizing that we're undertaking so that we can respond to the needs of people in the gig economy, young people, as well as more traditional sectors. It means really putting work and effort and time into building political movements that exist in people's lives

in spaces where they can meet rather than just online or kind of like as electoral vehicles. And I've kind of gone full circle from when I started out in politics. And I think you might remember there was this whole period of like the left has been engaging too much in folk politics. We've been protesting things, and now we need to focus on the institutions. And I was like, yeah, that's right, we do need to focus on the institutions. And now having spent some time in the institutions, I'm like, oh wait, we can't go through the institutions without building that popular power and those mass movements. So that's kind of like why I'm getting more involved in DiEM, because I think it's really important to do that at a pan European level. And yeah, that's kind of what I want to do.

YV: Well you heard it from Grace Blakeley. We have to build popular power from the bottom up. So join DiEM25: DiEM25.org. We are a transnational radical movement across Europe. And by Europe we don't mean the European Union, by the way, right? Europe is whatever we imagine it to be. We have branches in the Middle East, in Canada, in the United States. It's an internationalist movement. We help put together the Progressive International. So join us, DiEM25. Thank you, Grace.

GB: Thank you, Yanis.

END

Thank you for reading this transcript. Please don't forget to donate to support our independent and non-profit journalism:

BANKKONTO:	PAYPAL:	PATREON:	BETTERPLACE:
Kontoinhaber: acTVism München e.V. Bank: GLS Bank IBAN: DE89430609678224073600 BIC: GENODEM1GLS	E-Mail: PayPal@acTVism.org	https://www.patreon.com/acTVism	Link: Click here