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## Slouching Towards Athens

*The Obama agenda and the Europeanization of America.*

By ARTHUR C. BROOKS

Our friends across the Atlantic are fond of saying that Europeans work to live while Americans live to work. According to the data, they are basically right. Statistics from the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development show that while the average Italian, for example, enjoys 42 days of vacation per year, the average American has 16.

A predictable corollary: Many Europeans also expect others to work so they can live. The International Social Survey Programme asked Americans and Europeans whether they believe "It is the responsibility of the government to reduce the differences in income between people with high incomes and those with low incomes." In virtually all of Western Europe more than 50% agree, and in many countries it is much higher—77% in Spain, whose redistributive economy is in shambles. Meanwhile, only 33% of Americans agree with income redistribution.

Simply put, Europeans have a much stronger taste for other people's money than we do. This is vividly illustrated by the recent protests in the U.S. and Greece.

Why are citizens rioting and striking in Greece? Despite the worst economic crisis in decades, labor unions and state functionaries demand that others pay for the early retirements, lifetime benefits and state pensions to which they feel entitled. In America, however, the tea partiers demonstrate not to get more from others, but rather against government growth, public debt, bailouts and a budget-busting government overhaul of the health-care industry.

In other words, the tea partiers are protesting against exactly what the Greeks are demanding. It is an example of American exceptionalism if there ever was one.

Instead of celebrating this ethical populism, however, many political leaders here denounced the legitimacy of the tea party protesters. "It's not really a grass-roots movement," House Speaker Nancy Pelosi claimed after the tax day tea party protests in April 2009. "It's 'astroturf' by some of the wealthiest people in America to keep the focus on tax cuts for the rich." Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid borrowed her metaphor to discredit the ObamaCare protests a few months later. Holding up a square of synthetic turf at a press conference last August, Mr. Reid declared that the town hall demonstrations were "about as phony as this grass."

Average Americans are not as cynical. According to a Rasmussen poll conducted less than a week after the 2009 tax day protests, more than half of Americans viewed the protests favorably. And a September 2009 Kaiser/Harvard/NPR survey found that 61% of those polled believed the ObamaCare protesters at the town hall

meetings were mainly individual citizens coming together to express their views. Only 28% bought the idea they were mainly coordinated by health-care interest groups.

While the "astroturf" claims were laughable, the politicians peddling them may yet have the last laugh. For their policies—just as the tea partiers fear—promise to quietly turn today's principled protesters into the "me-first" rioters in Greece.

The increasing size of the federal work force is an early indication of what lies ahead. The Bureau of Labor Statistics reports that in the last year the federal government added 86,000 permanent (non-Census) jobs to the rolls. And high-paying jobs at that: The number of federal salaries over \$100,000 per year has increased by nearly 50% since the beginning of the recession.

Today, the average federal worker earns 77% more than the average private-sector worker, according to a USA Today analysis of data from the federal Office of Personnel Management. To pay for bigger government, the private sector will bear a heavier tax burden far into the future, suppressing the innovation and entrepreneurship that creates growth and real opportunity, not to mention the revenue that pays for everything else in the first place.

If these trends are not reversed, it is hard to see how our culture of free enterprise will not change. More and more Americans, especially younger Americans, will grow accustomed to a system in which the government pays better wages, offers the best job protection, allows the earliest retirement, and guarantees the most lavish pensions. Against such competition, more and more young, would-be entrepreneurs will inevitably choose the safety and comfort of government employment—and do so with all the drive that is generally thought to be "good enough" for that kind of work.

What will happen as our increasing number of state employees confront a shrinking private-sector tax base? Just look to the streets of Athens.

*Mr. Brooks is president of the American Enterprise Institute and author of "The Battle: How the Fight Between Free Enterprise and Big Government Will Shape America's Future," just released by Basic Books.*

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