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Performing neoliberalization through urban infrastructure: Twenty years of privatization policies around Thessaloniki's port*

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Abstract

This paper mobilizes the trajectory of privatization policies around Thessaloniki's port as an entry point to explore the neoliberalization of urban infrastructure politics in Greece since the late 1990s. It asks how neoliberalization policies around the port were conceptually legitimized and traces their implications for urban infrastructure governance. In doing so, it draws from a reading of neoliberalism as a performative discourse. This understanding allows analyzing the contingent and situated articulation of neoliberalization discourses as well as the context-specific implications of neoliberalization. The paper suggests that since the late 1990s neoliberalization discourses in Greece were articulated with discourses of modernization. This coupling was mutually reinforcing for the two rationalities. On the one hand, successive rounds of neoliberal policies around the port were conceptually legitimized through functionalist references to the modern. On the other, performing neoliberalization constituted a key strategy in maintaining state legitimacy. Within such a configuration, successive failures and limitations of neoliberal polic(y)ing were (re-)inscribed in discourses of neoliberalization. Tracing the emergence and workings of this articulation in the case of Thessaloniki's port, the paper also examines how successive rounds of neoliberalization consolidated, through failing forward, forms of governance beyond democratic accountability geared around consensus formation.

Keywords: performing neoliberalization, failing forward, de-politicization, urban infrastructure politics, Greece

1 Introduction

The continued prevalence of neoliberalism, despite its apparent de-legitimization in the aftermath of the 2008 crisis, has attracted renewed scholarly interest. As Wilson suggests, this interest is linked with an “uncertainty concerning the seemingly irrational endurance of neoliberalism in the face of all failures” (2014, page 301). More broadly, it poses the interrelated questions of how neoliberal policies legitimized in different conjunctures and what implications their prevalence brings about. Such questions cannot be adequately addressed in isolation from the “geographies of actually existing neoliberalism” (Brenner and Theodore, 2002). A key contribution of the voluminous geographical scholarship on neoliberalism over the past ten years has been the shift of analytical emphasis from a rather ubiquitous understanding of neoliberalism to readings of neoliberalization as a geographically variegated, contingent and hybrid process (Brenner et al., 2010b; England and Ward, 2007). Concerning urban neoliberalism in particular, this shift provides the ground for more nuanced understandings of context-specific neoliberalization processes. It opens up new ways to explore how neoliberalization is constructed and legitimized in particular urban contexts (Dikeç, 2006) “through an eclectic blend of failure and crisis, regulatory experimentation, and policy transfer across places, territories and scales” (Peck et al., 2013, page 1091). Urban infrastructures are a prominent terrain in and through which such processes are unfolding. The privatization of urban infrastructure networks is a key neoliberal orthodoxy promoted throughout the globe over the past four decades (Graham and Marvin, 2001). Instead of treating

infrastructure privatization as a homogeneous and homogenizing policy, however, geographical scholarship has sought “to explore the ways in which infrastructures, cities and nation states are produced and transformed together” (McFarlane and Rutherford, 2008, page 364). Here, urban infrastructure politics emerge as a discursive and material terrain in and through which political projects, rationalities and imaginaries are articulated, (new) governance and accumulation regimes are forged and uneven power relations are (re-)produced and contested (Graham and Marvin, 2001; Kaika and Swyngedouw, 2000). While not often explicitly discussed as urban infrastructures, ports offer an ideal entry point in analyzing “the co-evolution of cities and technical networks in a global context” (McFarlane and Rutherford 2008, page 365). This is not primarily because most major ports are still located in cities (Hall and Jacobs, 2012)¹, but more importantly because ports are key nodes in the socio-technical infrastructural networks that sustain urban life by supporting urban metabolic flows and shaping the ways in which “circulation is urbanized” (Cowen, 2014, page 184; Hesse, 2013; Swyngedouw, 2006). Therefore, analyzing transformations in port infrastructure and governance becomes central in understanding the (re-)weaving of the urban fabric and the changing and ever-expanding geographies of urbanization (Shaw and Sidaway, 2010). In this, transnational private players like shipping lines, global terminal operators and logistics services providers, global infrastructure funds and financial institutions (Torrance, 2008) as well as transnational agreements and global standards and protocols (Brenner, 2004; Cowen, 2014) are entangled with local planning, labor and

¹ As Hall and Jacobs (2012) document this is still the case despite transformations in maritime technologies including containerization and the rise of – often militarized – planetary logistics operations (Cowen, 2014).

environmental regulations (Cidell, 2012), political-economic actors and coalitions of interests as well as imaginaries and socio-cultural norms (Jaffee, 2015) in producing and governing port spaces. Reading port privatization policies, therefore, can unpack the ways in which neoliberalization is performed and legitimized in and through specific urban contexts.

Against this background, this paper aims to contribute to the discussions around the conceptual legitimization and context-specificity of neoliberalization by exploring the trajectory of privatization policies around Thessaloniki's port between the late 1990s and SYRIZA's (Coalition of the Radical Left) electoral win in January 2015. Building on a reading of neoliberalism as a performative discourse (Springer, 2012), I suggest that analyzing the situated (re-)articulations of neoliberalization discourses can help us understand their conceptual legitimization. In this, I chart how neoliberalization discourses in Greece have been articulated with discourses of modernization in a mutually reinforcing coupling since the late 1990s. Besides, bringing Jamie Peck's reading of neoliberalism as a failing forward process in dialogue with Judith Butler's notion of performativity, I trace the effects of twenty years of privatization policies around Thessaloniki's port. In doing so, I argue that performing neoliberalization has, through failing forward, gradually moved urban infrastructure governance beyond democratic accountability and depoliticized urban infrastructure politics.

The paper proceeds in three steps. The first two sections sketch the theoretical tenets that underpin the argument focusing on neoliberalization and modernization discourses respectively. The following four sections briefly situate

Thessaloniki's port and the major policies implemented before exploring the trajectory of privatization policies around Thessaloniki's Port Authority (ThPA). The discussion is organized around three thematics: the coupling of modernization and neoliberalization discourses, the neoliberalization of urban infrastructure as a failing forward process and the de-politicization of urban infrastructure politics. The final section articulates the insights of the previous sections and returns to the questions of neoliberalization's legitimization and context-specificity. The paper draws on eleven months of fieldwork (September 2010 – July 2011) in Thessaloniki. To chart the port's transformations, I conducted in-depth expert interviews with ThPA's management, shipping agents, local politicians and port workers. I also collected and analyzed reports and strategic plans issued by ThPA and the local and national government; legislation, international agreements and policy documents pertaining to reforms around the port; and reports from local and national media.

2 Neoliberalization as a performative discourse: hybrid discourses, failing forward and the de-politicization of urban infrastructures

Over the past twenty years an immense body of geographical work on neoliberalism has accumulated. And yet, as McCarthy and Prudham write “despite the familiarity of the concept, defining neoliberalism is no straightforward task” (2004, page 276). Nevertheless, we can identify, at least, four different understandings of neoliberalism: “as an ideological hegemonic project”, “as policy and program”, “as state form” and “as governmentality” (England and Ward, 2007, pages 11-13). Instead of confining neoliberalism to any of the above categories, here, I begin from Wendy Brown's conceptualization of neoliberalism as a “market-

political rationality”: “a specific form of normative political reason organizing the political sphere, governance practices, and citizenship” (2006, page 691-693).

This theorization foregrounds a shift of emphasis from an allegedly ubiquitous neoliberalism towards a conceptualization of neoliberalization as a “particular form of restructuring guided by [a] political rationality premised on the extension of market relations that privilege competition, efficiency, and economic success” (Dikeç, 2006, page 62). In a similar vein, Peck, Brenner and Theodore have, in a series of recent contributions, argued for a conceptualization of neoliberalization “as a variegated form of regulatory restructuring: [that] produces geo-institutional differentiation across places, territories and scales” (2010a, page 330). This shift allows for more nuanced understandings of how neoliberalization produces spaces while simultaneously being “produced upon and through the spaces of *particular* states and cities” (Dikeç, 2006, page 59). In other words, it calls attention to how neoliberalization “only ever exists in articulation with actors, institutions and agendas” (Castree, 2006, page 2).

In this context, Simon Springer has recently proposed a conceptualization of neoliberalism as discourse: “recognized as a mutable, inconsistent, and variegated process that circulates through the discourses it constructs, justifies, and defends” (2012, page 135). This should not be understood as a mere call for linguistic analysis. Whilst institutional practices of regulatory development and polic(y)ing are central in understanding “actually existing neoliberalism” (Brenner and Theodore, 2002); such institutional arrangements are always inscribed in discursive constellations and are, thus, influenced by them. Judith Butler’s notion of discursive performativity can be

illuminating here. For Butler, “performativity [is] not (...) the act by which a subject brings into being what she/he names, but, rather, (...) that reiterative power of discourse to produce the phenomena that it regulates and constrains” (1993, page 3). In this line of argument, neoliberalization discourses, *tend* to produce the geographies of “actually existing neoliberalism” (Brenner and Theodore, 2002) through practices of “re-iteration, re-establishment and sedimentation” (Butler, 2010, page 149).

This has two important analytical implications for our understanding of neoliberalization. Firstly, as Springer suggests, it calls for particular attention to the “re-articulations and representations of neoliberal discourse in the form of particular discourses of neoliberalization, where individual actors take a proactive role in reshaping the formal practices of politics, policy, and administration” (2012, page, 142). Such neoliberalization discourses, however, are always contingent and historico-geographically specific; they are constantly re-articulated within particular configurations (Laclau, 1990, pages 31-36). Hence, as Mustafa Dikeç suggests with regard to the neoliberalization of French urban policy, “modes of legitimization vary depending on established political traditions” (2006, page 78). In the French case, Dikeç argues, neoliberalization has, since the 1980s, been articulated with notions of French Republicanism in producing hybrid urban policies (2006). More recently, Ozan Karaman has analyzed how neoliberalization has been coupled with Islamism in legitimizing AKP’s urban policies in Turkey (2013).

Secondly, understanding neoliberalism as a performative discourse allows understanding what Jamie Peck calls the “turgid reality of neoliberalism variously

failing and flailing forward” (2011, page 7). For, as Butler suggests, “performativity never fully achieves its effect, and so in this sense ‘fails’ all the time; its failure is what necessitates its reiterative temporality, and we cannot think iterability without failure” (2010, page 153). Or in Peck’s account of neoliberalism, its “burden—as a resilient, responsive and deeply reactionary credo—is that it can never remake the world in its own image” (2011, page 7). Therefore, insofar as performing neoliberalization will never lead to its pure and “idealized destination” (*ibid*), neoliberalization discourses will, time and again, be re-invented, re-articulated and represented on the grounds of their previous failures. On the one hand, this suggests that “the limits of earlier forms of neoliberalization” (Peck, 2011, page 6) will be re-inscribed in discourses of neoliberalization and further rounds of neoliberal experimentation. On the other, it highlights that neoliberalization is a cumulative process of market-oriented regulatory restructuring (Brenner et al., 2010b) that proceeds as a paradoxical “process that achieves its effects in both regenerative and accumulative ways” (Butler, 2010, page 149).

In this setting, it is important to note that a fundamental transformation that successive rounds of neoliberalization have brought about is the articulation of processes of de-politicization and governance reorganization (Mouffe, 2005, Rancière, 1999, Swyngedouw, 2011). In *Disagreement*, Jacques Rancière, argues that the “reigning idyll” in contemporary European democracies is “consensus democracy” (1999, page 102). That is “a government practice and conceptual legitimization” that seeks to “evacuate politics” and democratic disagreement, reducing society to “the sole interplay of state mechanisms and combinations of

social energies and interests” (1999, page 101-102). For Rancière, de-politicization has both an institutional and a discursive dimension. Concerning the latter, as Chantal Mouffe argues, neoliberalization discourses are marked by an identification of democracy with “actually existing liberal democratic capitalism” (1993, page 10), leading to an often “outright identification of democratic form with the necessities of global capital” (Stavrakakis, 2007, page 264). To put it in Rancière words: “the absolute identification of politics with the management of capital is no longer the shameful secret hidden behind the ‘forms’ of democracy; it is the openly declared truth by which our governments acquire legitimacy” (1999, page 113).

Concerning the former, geographical research over the past twenty years has documented the consolidation of networked governing arrangements that bring together the state, market and civil society actors at a variety of interlinked spatial scales (Brenner, 2004; Swyngedouw, 2005). Urban infrastructure networks and projects are paradigmatic of this new mode of “governance-beyond-the-state” (Swyngedouw, 2005): [t]hey fuse together actors, elites, and institutions not only from the local social milieu, but also from the national or international level” (Swyngedouw, 2009, pages 55-57). Together with the outright privatization of urban infrastructure networks, such governance arrangements tend to overemphasize the role of policy-making, administrative and managerial aspects. A vast techno-managerial and expert apparatus is proliferating, embedded within variably neoliberal regimes of polity (Mouffe, 2005, Swyngedouw, 2011). This amounts to “the growth of a managerial approach to government: government is reconceived as a managerial function, deprived of its proper political dimension” (Žižek, 2002, page

303). Furthermore, such networks and expert agents often operate in what Maarten Hajer calls an “institutional void” (2003). The inclusion or exclusion of actors and the accountability of these networked arrangements “often take place in non-transparent, ad hoc, and context-dependent ways and differ greatly from those associated with egalitarian pluralist democratic rules and codes” (Swyngedouw, 2009, page 57). Consequently, policy-making and urban governance are increasingly slipping away from democratic accountability and political control consolidating “the political powers of authorities who are not accountable (experts, judges, committees)” (Rancière, 1999: 97).

This being said, “global trends are differentially experienced, and take place in different contexts of fragmentation of networked infrastructures in different parts of the world” (McFarlane and Rutherford, 2008, page 365). Infrastructure production and management take quite distinct forms in different urban contexts. The remainder of this paper traces these dynamics through the trajectory of Thessaloniki’s port. Before doing so, however, it briefly explores the meaning of discourses around ‘the modern’ in contemporary Greece as it was through their coupling with neoliberalization discourses that privatization policies were promoted.

3 Unpacking modernization discourses in contemporary Greece (1990s-2010s)

As with neoliberalism, I do not understand modernization as a coherent and fully-formed political project. Rather, I read modernization as a discourse that seeks to narrate all aspects of life (political, economic, cultural etc) along the dichotomy

between the 'old' and the 'modern'. In this paper, I am specifically concerned with the particular forms that modernization discourses took in Greece since the 1990s.

While modernization discourses were diffused in the Greek political landscape throughout the post-dictatorship period (post-1974), modernization emerged as a key political discourse in the early 1990s. September 1996 marked a radical turning point. PASOK (Panhellenic Socialist Movement) under the leadership of Costas Simitis won the national elections and renewed its term. Simitis' PASOK, however, was significantly different from the populist centre-left party established by Andreas Papandreou in 1974. Between 1996 and 2004 PASOK's political agenda was articulated around the notion of modernization (*«εκσυγχρονισμός»*). Modernization ideas, however, were by no means restricted in supporters of PASOK finding large appeal both within conservative New Democracy (ND) and the left (Tsakalotos, 2010). Simitis' electoral wins in 1996 and 2000 signified the hegemony of modernization discourses during the period. The ascent of ND to government in 2004 did not significantly alter the discursive coordinates. ND's "re-establishment of the state" campaign, under Prime Minister Kostas Karamanlis, did not question the core of modernization discourses but on the contrary criticized PASOK for failing to effectively implement the accompanying policies. Greece has, since the late 1990s, been witnessing the "confluence of the mainstream centre-right and centre-left parties on a liberal-modernizing agenda" (Kioupkiolis, 2014, page 145).

The thrust of modernization discourses was that because of its historico-geographical particularities Greece has not followed the capitalist development trajectory of its European counterparts. An oversized, inefficient and clientelist state,

a weak civil society and severe inadequacies in major infrastructures were hindering the country's development. Simitis' inaugural parliamentary speech summarized the way forward as building "a modern, strong Greece [through] the equal participation of the country in European integration (...) the development of a competitive and dynamic economy, (...) the modernization of the State and the country" (Hellenic Parliament, 1996, no page). "Strong Greece", "Europeanization" and "development" were the nodal points for modernization discourses, symbolically condensed in two key aims: Eurozone membership; and the organization of the 2004 Athens Olympic Games. In the following years, urban large-scale infrastructure networks became the "semiotic and aesthetic vehicles" (Larkin, 2013, page 329) sustaining the fantasy of "Strong Greece". As the infrastructures for the Olympics were built and major highways across the country were constructed, a functionalist and performative understanding of urban politics was articulated wherein: "every tangible and imposing result (...) efface[d] from the [political] map questions over its objectives, uses, beneficiaries or the processes followed for its attainment" (Sevastakis, 2004, page 100).

Part and parcel with the alluring fantasy of "Strong Greece", modernization discourses also constructed their 'Other'. Perhaps the most influential account in this respect is Nikiforos Diamandouros' "cultural dualism" thesis. Drawing heavily from structural functionalist and linear modernization theories prevalent in the U.S. in the 1950s and 1960s, Diamandouros argued that the introduction of modern Western institutions in Greece led to "intense social, political, and cultural struggles" between potential losers and beneficiaries resulting in two distinct cultural camps that ensued

in post-dictatorship Greece: the “underdogs” and the “modernizers” (1994, page 8). Whereas the former is entrenched “among the very extensive, traditional, more introverted, and least competitive strata and sectors of Greek society” the latter “draws its intellectual origins from the Enlightenment ... [is] secular and extrovert in orientation” and adheres to a modernization project (Diamandouros, 1994, page 17). The “underdog culture” is further characterized by a “deep lack of faith (...) towards capitalism and the workings of the market” (Diamantouros, 2000, page 80). This dualist logic, however, builds on a Eurocentric logic downplaying the complexity of different development trajectories (Tziouvas, 1995). A linear, evolutionary and economic logic marks modernization discourses reducing the complexities, struggles and contradictions of the transition to modern capitalist economies in Europe to a homogeneous pattern (Demertzis, 1997).

4 Situating Thessaloniki’s port privatization policies (1990s-2010s)

Thessaloniki’s port is the second biggest port in Greece and the major gateway port for the southern Balkan area. It is located on the Orient-East Med Core Network Corridor of the Trans-European Transport Network (TEN-T) and is a node in the Pan-European Corridors IV and X. The port serves the domestic market of Thessaloniki and Northern Greece as well as a wider and internationally contested hinterland in the Balkan Peninsula, predominantly southern Serbia, Macedonia and south-western Bulgaria (ThPA, 2017).

By the mid-1990s Thessaloniki’s port was at a turning point. On the one hand, the collapse of the socialist regimes and the subsequent integration of the Balkan economies in globalized capital and goods flows signalled the gradual revitalization

of the links between the port and its Balkan hinterland. On the other, transformations in maritime technology since the 1970s, including containerization, new port technologies and changes in the size of ships were putting significant pressure on the port's infrastructure exacerbated by its limited land. The completion of the construction of the port's container terminal in 1989 and the westward expansion of its infrastructure were significant, albeit inadequate, improvements in dealing with these pressures. As industries from Thessaloniki were relocating to the Balkans and Greek and international capital flows were reopening the derelict Balkan industries (Labrianidis, 2011), the port witnessed significant increases in dry bulk cargo traffic (mainly coal and ores) reaching a peak of 4.6m tones in 2007 as well as in container traffic leading to a peak of 447,221 TEUs handled by the port in 2007 (a 167% increase compared to 1997) (ThPA, 2008a). Nevertheless, Thessaloniki's port was also beginning to face increasing competition from neighbouring ports (Burgas and Varna in Bulgaria, Durres in Albania, Bar in Montenegro and Adriatic Sea ports) that were claiming part of the transports in its contested hinterland. Therefore, for Thessaloniki's political elite improving the port's infrastructure and hinterland connections was "essential" for "the metropolitan role that the city want[ed] to play in the Balkans" (Municipality of Thessaloniki, 2005, page 125). Pressures towards this direction were also exerted from the city's economic elite – represented by the Union of Industrialists of Northern Greece (SVVE) and Thessaloniki's Chamber of Commerce and Industry (EVETH) – in order to serve its vested interests in the Balkans.

In this context and throughout the past two decades, Thessaloniki's port would become the terrain for successive rounds of neoliberal experimentation. In this paper, I focus on the three most prominent experiments as key moments of re-articulation of the discursive and political coordinates. First, the quasi-privatization of ThPA introduced by PASOK's government in 1999 (Law 2688/99). Second, ND's efforts to privatize the port's container terminal in 2008 (Law 3654/2008), resulting in a temporary but ultimately failed concession agreement between ThPA and the Hutchinson-Alapis consortium. Finally, the enlisting of ThPA as one of the assets to be privatized as part of the loan agreement between Greece and its creditors² (Law 3986/2011, Law 4092/2012), that has not, up until SYRIZA's election in 2015, been fulfilled. In the remainder of this paper I analyze this trajectory organized around three thematics: the coupling of modernization and neoliberalization discourses, the sedimented results of 'failed' neoliberal experiments, and the de-politicization of urban infrastructure politics.

5 Neoliberalization as Modernization and the privatization of ThPA

ThPA was first inscribed in neoliberalization discourses through the European Convergence Programme designed by the Minister of Finance Yannis Papantoniou in 1997. That year the Greek public deficit was at 4% and the public debt at 109.5% of the GDP (Eurostat, 2002), both being well-above the Maastricht criteria. Consequently, the centrality of joining the Eurozone in modernization discourses posited public deficit and debt reduction as the primary objectives of PASOK's economic policy and as synonymous to good governance. For Papantoniou, a key

² European Union (EU), International Monetary Fund (IMF) and European Central Bank (ECB)

way to achieve these objectives was the privatization of various public infrastructure companies including telecommunication networks, power infrastructure, local water services, airports and ports. From its very conception ThPA's privatization was knitted together with the country's integration in the Eurozone in both public and policy discourses (Pallis, 2006).

Hand in glove with the Eurozone fiscal rules, the progressive privatization of infrastructure monopolies also had the active support of the European Commission (EC) (Plaskovitis, 2000). Whilst recognizing the Mediterranean region as one of "great complexity and contrasts", in its 1997 *Green paper on Sea Ports and Maritime Infrastructures*, the EC cites "current economic considerations" and "a noticeable shift in attitude regarding the function and role of ports" (CEU, 1997, page 12) to argue that "the introduction of market principles in infrastructure works, (...), would be the most effective remedy to avoid the risk of creating wasteful overcapacity and possible distortions of trade flows between Member States" (CEU, 1997, page 14). In the following years, while a multiplicity of institutional configurations were established in member states, involving local and national state at different degrees, the assumption that the privatization and liberalization of port infrastructures will increase their competitiveness and efficiency remained the cornerstone of EU policy-orientations (CEU, 2004).

This is not, however, to suggest that ThPA's privatization was imposed on Greece by the EU. In the late 1990s, ThPA was characterized by "insensitivity towards users' demands, absence of port facilities and inland connections, (...) [and] lack of investment (...)" (Pallis, 2006, page 156). Building on these existing problems,

modernizers eagerly argued that the public port authority was fundamentally “anachronistic and inadequate” as opposed to the “modern alternative” of privatization, “market rationality and economic efficiency” (Christofilopoulou, 1998, page 62). Port modernization was, thus, equated with neoliberal orthodoxies around privatization that would allow the introduction of “new technologies and organizational structures” and “attract high-yield investments” (Pallis, 2006, page 158). Hence, adopting a strikingly similar language to that of the EC, the law introducing ThPA’s privatization in 1999 (Law 2688/99) explained how the reform sought to “facilitate the adjustment of the sector to contemporary trends, (...) overcome the deficiencies of the pre-existing port structures” (Hellenic Republic, 1999, no page) and promote “the greatest possible private participation in the provision of port services” (Ministry of Mercantile Marine, 2002, page 7). Thessaloniki’s integration in global transportation networks, so the argument went, would necessitate ThPA’s privatization (Hellenic Republic, 1999) and IMF’s and EU’s strong support for reform were repeatedly cited as proof of that (Politis, 1998, 1999).

Attracting private capital, then, was seen as a modernizing force that would help ThPA deal with “the rapidly developing increase in competition (...) from terminals in the wider region” (ThPA, 2007, page 68) and facilitate its transition from a marginal secondary EU port to an integral part of the EU’s maritime transport networks. Seven years after PASOK’s quasi-privatization reform, ND’s newly elected government sought to legitimize the privatization of ThPA’s container terminal in almost identical terms. For ND, Thessaloniki’s port needed “to adapt to international

standards and *modern* trade and transport needs, which *necessitate* the introduction of capital and expertise from the private sector” (Hellenic Republic, 2008, page 12, my emphasis). Hutchinson, as a major player in the global container terminal market, and Alapis’ CEO and major shareholder Lavrentis Lavrentiadis, as a successful Greek investor, were the ‘heroes’ that were to bring forward the necessary modernization. Lavrentiadis, in particular, was at the time attracting the interest of Greek and foreign media as a “success story” and a “big player” (Hope, 2009; Sokou, 2006). He was an entrepreneur who “ha[d] the passion required” to deal with the “everyday adventure” of doing business in the “unstable institutional environment, bureaucracy and corruption that dominates Greek economy” (Sokou, 2006, no page) and whose involvement in the privatization of the container terminal would “increase the earnings for all stakeholders and especially (...) ThPA” (Lavrentiadis, 2008, no page). And yet, these ‘modernization heroes’ had to deal with the “romantics and fundamentalists” resisting the privatization policy as they were “unable to understand the givens of modern infrastructure management” (Hellenic Parliament, 2008, no page). The concession of the container terminal to Hutchison-Alapis, however, was not cancelled by these “romantics and fundamentalists” but by the 2008 financial crisis that led to the withdrawal of the consortium’s offer.

Only three years after Hutchinson-Alapis’ withdrawal ThPA would become inscribed into a third wave of neoliberalization policies, this time as part of the bailout agreement between Greece and its creditors. The advent of the Greek debt crisis, however, would bring about a reorganization of the discursive coordinates. Overnight the rhetoric of success and the strong modernizing Greece gave its place

to discourses of failure, catastrophe and national salvation (Stavrakakis, 2013). The symptom of Greece's failure was the accumulation of debt. Debt, however, as Stavrakakis suggests, was also the nodal point in the articulation of a discursive operation "creating and sustaining shame and guilt and thus legitimising punishment" (2013, page 315). For neoliberal modernizers the underlying cause of debt, as a symptom of failure, was the "Greek exceptionalism" (Tsakalotos, 2010). Greek exceptionalism, so the argument went, consisted of trying to "become Europe without [adopting] truly European attitudes in the economic, political and cultural domains" as Kostis Hatzidakis, ND's Minister between 2007 and 2009, put it (2012, no page). The prime reason for this was the prevalence of "political clientelism (...)and the (...) effort to avoid political cost" that over time proved to be stronger "than the efforts for (...) modernization of the state and society" (Simitis, 2010, no page).

The remedy, then, was a further round of 'modern' neoliberalization policies. ThPA's privatization was dictated by the necessity "to significantly reduce public debt" (Hellenic Parliament, 2010, page 48). Most importantly, however, for PASOK's Minister of Finance in 2010, George Papakonstantinou, it was a policy followed across the globe "[where] governments are attempting to exploit and utilize public property in favor of a restructuring of the economy and the introduction of private capital, which helps productivity and competitiveness; helps providing improved services to citizens" (Hellenic Parliament, 2010, page 47).

Effectively, the coupling of modernization and neoliberalization discourses has been the prevalent strategy in legitimizing the three rounds of privatization

policies around ThPA. During the late 1990s and the 2000s, this coupling revolved around the fantasy of the 'strong Greece' that was becoming a modern European country. The same coupling was mobilized since the outbreak of the crisis, only this time the rhetoric of 'success story' has given its place to notions of punishment for not becoming modern/European, meaning not neoliberal, enough.

6 Failing forward neoliberalization: tracing the effects of 20 years of neoliberal policies around Thessaloniki's port

The fact that ThPA has not been fully privatized does not mean that the port did not undergo a neoliberal restructuring. This section describes how the implemented policies have gradually consolidated a neoliberal rationality around the port's governance whilst failing to achieve their declared full-privatization aim. As already noted, the port's neoliberal restructuring began with the first wave of privatization reforms in 1999. The initial privatization plan, designed by the Bank of America, foresaw the unbundling of ThPA's activities and their concession to private capital(s) (Politis, 1999; see Graham and Marvin, 2001). However, Simitis' government promoted a quasi-privatization policy through the corporatization of ThPA to ameliorate public opposition to the privatization and minimize political costs. The private enterprise ThPA SA was established and acquired "the exclusive right to use and exploit the land, buildings and facilities of Thessaloniki's Port Terrestrial Zone" (Hellenic Republic, 1999, page 611). Yet, the Greek state remained the sole shareholder of the company. ThPA's quasi-privatization was consolidated in July 2001, when the Inter-ministerial Privatization Committee decided the listing of 25.73% of ThPA's shares on Athens Stock Exchange. Together with the €16 million

that it brought to the state coffer (Ta Nea, 2001), the decision also aimed to strengthen investors' interest in Athens Stock Exchange. PASOK's governments actively encouraged 'the markets' and small investors to invest in the 'blue chips' of quasi-privatized infrastructure networks during the 1997-2002 Athens Stock Exchange boom. The listing of ThPA, together with a series of other infrastructure and utility networks, served PASOK's central goal of consolidating financial markets and the banking sector (Stathakis, 2010).

The two reforms introduced a radical shift around ThPA's governance. Henceforth, ThPA SA was to operate "towards profit-maximization within the market economy" (ThPA, 2004, page 10). Moreover, as a result of its listing on Athens Stock Exchange, ThPA's land and infrastructure began to be continuously assessed using financial criteria. Consequently, financial assessment and market efficiency were instituted as the governing principles around the port. And yet, as the Greek State remained ThPA's major shareholder (74.13%), the Minister of Mercantile Marine maintained the privilege to appoint the organization's manager (ThPA, 2004). As similar models were introduced in many quasi-privatized utility companies, a quite paradoxical logic of state entrepreneurialism was consolidated accompanied by the formation of a state-appointed techno-managerial elite (Sevastakis, 2004). Compared to the neoliberal archetype of full-scale privatization the first wave of state-led neoliberalization around the port was a failure. Nevertheless, it resulted in a configuration wherein the new techno-managerial elite in close cooperation with the political elite, were following the market logic.

The 1999 reform paved the way for the second wave of neoliberalization revolving around the efforts to privatize ThPA's container terminal between 2006 and 2008. This time, it was ND's government that announced its intention to attract "giga-investments through the concession of activities" to global terminal operators (Macedonian Press Agency, 2006, no page). Besides, anticipating the government's policies (and operating within market criteria), ThPA's strategic investment plan foresaw that "the necessary expansion of its container terminal out to sea" would materialize through its "imminent privatization" (2005, page 1). In January 2008 ThPA issued an international call for tenders for the container terminal (ThPA, 2008b). Three global container terminal operators – Hutchison Port Holdings, Cosco Pacific and Dubai Port World – responded to the call. Except from Cosco, global operators were collaborating with Greek investment and infrastructure funds. Hutchison cooperated with Lavrentis Lavrentiadis' Alapis SA pharmaceutical company and Dubai Port World with Piraeus Bank and the largest Greek construction company Aktor SA. Hutchison-Alapis offered a guaranteed total amount of €419.5 million, 2.5 times the fee offered by Cosco and 7 times the fee offered by Dubai Port World consortium (ThPA, 2008c). In July 2008, ThPA announced a temporary agreement with Hutchison-Alapis. However, in December 2008, the consortium withdrew its interest. In a laconic statement ThPA's chairman, Lazaros Kanavouras, attributed the development to the outbreak of the financial crisis (Imerisia, 2008). In parallel, a series of media publications – citing ThPA executives who wished to remain anonymous – argued that the ultimately failed negotiations between the stakeholders involved a fundamental renegotiation of the terms of the agreement as

the consortium was facing difficulties in securing funding for the expansion of the container terminal out to sea (Kalli, 2008; Lampropoulos, 2008).

After the consortium's withdrawal it became apparent that the fee offered, for a secondary European port like Thessaloniki, was speculatively high. Speculative investments were the decisive factor for the future of ThPA's container terminal. While speculative offers were the rule in container terminal operation market at the time³, Alapis' involvement calls for further attention. Speculative investments were central in Alapis' owner meteoric career. Adopting an aggressive strategy of mergers and acquisitions in a context of deregulated financial markets, Lavrentiadis effectively transformed his pharmaceutical company into a hedge fund. For Alapis the involvement in the port deal aimed at "the effective *short-term financial leverage* of investment funds" (Alapis SA, 2008b, no page, my emphasis). Indeed, the announcement of the temporary agreement with ThPA was followed by a round of capital share increase and the issuing of a €300 million convertible bond loan (Alapis SA, 2008a). Two years after the concession agreement's failure, Alapis filed a request for bankruptcy facing severe problems in serving the loans that supported Lavrentiadis' aggressive speculative practices (To Vima, 2011). In the meantime, Lavrentiadis had expanded his activities in banking by acquiring 31.5% of the small Greek Proton Bank from Piraeus Bank for €70.7 million in late 2009 (Papachristou, 2009). According to the Bank of Greece auditors, in 2010 and 2011 Proton Bank issued loans of €701 million to companies connected with Lavrentiadis, including

³ The guaranteed fee for the concession was approximately 21 times the earnings before interest, taxes, depreciation and amortization (EBITDA) for the whole of ThPA's activities in 2007 amounting to €19.9 million (ThPA, 2008a). Notteboom and Rodrigue estimate that a series of deals were made at prices 15 to 25 times the EBITDA of the terminals between 2000 and 2007 (2012).

Alapis, with little or no collaterals, no business plans and within a few days from the request (Papadakou, 2011; Reuters, 2012). However, in July 2011, while still under investigation, Proton Bank received €100 million of state funds in the name of the financial sector's stability. In a parliamentary speech, PASOK's Minister of Finance Evangelos Venizelos explicated his rationale:

“Think logically and responsibly (...) Is it possible for the Greek state to believe (...) [that] a legally operating bank is insolvent? (...) *All our banks are solvent because they are supported by the Greek government, the Bank of Greece and the European Central Bank.*” (Hellenic Parliament, 2011, pages 207-208, my emphasis).

While draconian austerity measures were imposed on the majority of the population, the costs of Lavrentiadis' failed speculative moves were eagerly covered by the Greek state. Lavrentiadis' case, however, is not an exception of corrupt practices. Rather, it exemplifies a dominant way through which political and economic elites in Greece were (re-)produced and closely articulated over the past twenty years. The 1999 quasi-privatization reforms transformed urban infrastructure spaces into prominent terrains for speculative moves. Tycoons, who benefitted from the deregulation of the financial and especially the banking sector, in cooperation with global capital, attempted to boost their profits through speculative investments and political links.

And yet, the failure of the concession agreement did not challenge the dominance of privatization policies. In a 2013 special issue of the journal *Port.Thess* – published by ThPA – SVVE and EVETH, representing the city's economic elite, and

local politicians also concurred on the urgency of the privatization process as well as on the importance of attracting specialized infrastructure capital (Port.Thess, 2013).

7 Consensual infrastructure politics and the de-politicization of Thessaloniki's port privatization

While scholarly debates around de-politicization have acquired centrality in Greece since the outbreak of the crisis, its emergence and consolidation around infrastructure politics can be traced back to the late 1990s. This section unearths the discursive and institutional reconfigurations that have sought to gradually depoliticize infrastructure politics over the past three decades.

The first steps towards this direction can, again, be traced back to the 1999 privatization reform. Perhaps the most important corollary of the coupling of modernization and neoliberalization discourses has been the silencing of political questions around urban infrastructure politics. As soon as privatization was identified with the only viable modern alternative in hegemonic discourses, the articulation of alternative imaginaries was forestalled. "To search for and experiment with 'alternative' roads for development" is a characteristic of the underdog culture in late development societies (2000, page 54), Diamandouros argued; bringing to mind Alain Badiou's comment that "modernization is the name for a strict and servile definition of the possible" (2008, page 50). For modernizers, following the market logic was not a political choice but exhausted the universe of the possible. Hence, according to the 1999 concession agreement between the Greek state and ThPA, the port was to be led by "neutral experts" (ThPA, 2006, page 10) on the basis

of “non-political” market criteria (ThPA, 2006, page 10). The agreement can, thus, be seen as an institutionalization in the form of law of what Pierre Bourdieu calls the ‘de-politicization of the economic’ (2002). In parallel, the ‘outsourcing’ of ThPA’s activities together with the still prominent role of the state “render[ed] the boundary between public and private organizations permeable” (Stoker, 1998, page 38). The quasi-private/quasi-public ThPA became part of the plethora of stakeholders involved in “achieving the broad consensus of representatives of the private, public and social sector of the city to create a common development vision” (Municipality of Thessaloniki, 2005, page 493). The act of governing the urban was gradually being reconfigured to an art of consensus building between – competing but cooperating – stakeholder interests.

The negotiations around the privatization of ThPA’s container terminal provide a prominent example in this respect. For ND’s government and ThPA’s management the privatization of the container terminal was an exercise in consensus building (ThPA, 2007). Consensus, however, was to be achieved within the already defined aim of privatization that was constructed as a solution promoting the “‘general interest of the people’ [and] whose implementation [would] overcome the winners/losers form of resolution of conflicts” (Mouffe, 2005, page 14). Despite the allegedly inclusive character of the institutional framework around the port’s management, however, exclusion borders were drawn when the inevitability of the privatization was questioned. To begin with, the workers’ representatives sitting in ThPA’s board and a host of parliament members that disagreed with the privatization of the terminal were impeded from participating in the board meeting

that was to formulate the call for bids for the terminal (Interview, Port Worker, 11/2010). More importantly, discursive exclusion borders were also drawn around the workers' industrial action against the concession of the terminal. Already from the first month of industrial action, local and national newspapers portrayed an apocalyptic image concerning the consequences of the strike, with titles like: "Port strike brings the market to its knees" (Koutsamparis, 2008) and "The strike in ThPA sinks businesses" (Mathiopoulou, 2008). For neoliberal modernizers, the striking port workers were a privileged minority stubbornly "adopting a narrow-minded stance ignoring the interests of the organization" (Interview, ThPA management, 05/2011) and "holding [Thessaloniki's] entire society to ransom" as, Yiorgos Mylonas, President of SVVE, put it (2008, page 3). In this context, political antagonism was not eradicated but rather slipped into the category of moralistic and legalistic discourses (Mouffe, 2005, Stavrakakis, 2007). Eventually, the conflict around workers' industrial action would dominate the agenda around the concession of the container terminal overshadowing political questions over public infrastructure management, environmental regulation and labor rights.

Besides, for neoliberal modernizers these questions were not to be publicly debated, but privately and consensually negotiated between ThPA, the Greek state and Hutchinson-Alapis. The call for bids for the container terminal had already reduced politics around the port into private negotiations. Details over the governance of the terminal, including working conditions and environmental regulations as well as its expansion out to sea, were to be consensually agreed between ThPA and Hutchison-Alapis (ThPA, 2008d). International research on such

negotiations and deals has documented how they shift urban infrastructure governance towards market mechanisms as private actors create governance rules and regimes in co-operation and interaction with the state (Torrance, 2008). Whilst in Thessaloniki these negotiations ultimately failed, what remains important is that they happened at a distance from both the public and the port's workers.

Arguably, however, the de-politicization of urban infrastructure politics reached its climax during the third wave of privatization policies. The primary ground for conceptually legitimizing the dogmatic neoliberal policies that accompanied the bailout agreement was the seriousness and urgency of the country's condition. As early as December 2009, Prime Minister, Yiorgos Papandreou, effectively summarized the logic proclaiming that "our homeland is in the ER (...) [w]e shall never forget the words of Andreas Papandreou 'we will either eliminate debt or debt will annihilate the country'" (2009, no page). In hegemonic discourses metaphors of sickness were coupled by apocalyptic narratives in the event of the country declaring bankruptcy. A "state of permanent economic emergency" (Žižek, 2010, page 85) was, thus, constructed through the cultivation of fear (Douzinas, 2013). For Thessaloniki's port, in particular, the urgency of the privatization was further exacerbated by the failure of the concession agreement in 2008. As ThPA's CEO, Stylianos Angeloudis, put it: "if the process of exploitation of the port (...) is not carried forward immediately, the port of Thessaloniki will in the next 7 years become a small regional port" (Kathimerini, 2013, no page).

The urgency of the situation was such that there was no time and room for politics, disagreement and democratic governance. The trajectory of the design and

implementation of the privatizations scheme accompanying the bailout agreement is marked by a reduction of politics to negotiations between experts, strictly limited public information and minimal compliance with the formal envelope of democracy. To begin with, the details of the privatization scheme, as of the entire structural adjustment programme, were negotiated in private meetings between EU-IMF-ECB technocrats and successive Greek governments. Despite their centrality in the formulation of politics, however, such discussions were reduced to a tightly controlled spectacle foreclosing the information available to the public (Douzinas, 2013).

Yet, even these private meetings were too political for the creditors. Consequently, the Hellenic Republic Asset Development Fund (HRADF) was institutionalized, in July 2011, in order to “restrict governmental intervention in the privatization process” (HRADF, 2011a, no page). The HRADF acquired all of the state assets that were to be privatized. According to the EC, its institutionalization was essential in managing the privatization process through “an independent and depoliticized board of directors and an advisory board (...) to benefit from international experience and technical expertise” (2011, pages 30-31). The HRADF is administered by a government appointed six-member Board of Directors comprising of “[i]ndividuals of wide acclaim, scientific training and professional proficiency and reliability with a high level of know-how (...) in business administration (...), in financial sector activities or in real estate development and management” (Hellenic Republic, 2011a, pages 3227-3228). Similar criteria inform the appointment of two

members by Eurozone countries and the EC as well as of a Council of Experts that provides further techno-managerial expertise (*ibid*).

In this context, HRADF's first step towards the exploitation of ThPA was the appointment of further expert consultancy services to explore options around "the exploitation of the ports infrastructure via concessions of parts or groups of ports operations or via share sale" (HRADF, 2012, page 33). More specifically, Morgan Stanley and Piraeus Bank were appointed as financial advisors, Alexiou-Kosmopoulos Law firms and Freshfields as legal advisors and HPC Hamburg and Marnet as technical advisors (HRADF, 2011b). The initial suggestions of the expert consultants around ThPA were discussed during a private meeting between the representatives of the HRADF and members of Thessaloniki's politico-economic elite – including mayor Yannis Boutaris, ThPA's CEO Stylianos Angeloudis and the president's of SVVE and EVETH – in May 2012 (Mitrakis, 2012). Similar meetings and consultations occurred in the following three years. Discussions in these meetings revolved around the preferred method of privatization for the port. Despite the mobilization of expert knowledge and the depoliticized HRADF, however, ThPA has not yet been privatized.

And yet, the commitment to privatize ThPA has already been institutionalized in Greek law (Hellenic Republic, 2012a). In this, ThPA's transfer to HRADF was approved only by the Inter-ministerial Committee for Restructuring and Privatization (Hellenic Republic, 2011b, 2012b) and not by the Parliament Plenary. The trajectory of decision-making around the port is indicative of a wider transformation of Greek politics in the aftermath of the crisis. As Kioupkiolis writes "[t]he practice of state rule entered a zone of indistinction between law and fact, since de facto government

proceedings and decisions were converted into law and laws were increasingly stripped of any normative justification and were dictated by 'necessity' itself" (2014, page 147). Politics in the midst of the crisis became a task that is "too decisive and too sustained not to be left to the experts, to those who know how" (Rancière, 1999, page 113). The "'expert state' that follows strict economic necessity bec[a]me thus identified with 'democratic form'" (Rancière, 1999, page 112). However, while the form of democracy survived, democratic accountability and power control were radically foreclosed.

8 Conclusions

This paper offered a reading of the neoliberal policies around Thessaloniki's port over the past twenty years. Building on an understanding of neoliberalization as a performative discourse, it provided three insights around the reconfiguration of urban infrastructure politics in Greece. First, the paper charted the emergence and workings of a mutually reinforcing coupling between neoliberalization and modernization discourses. During the 1990s and 2000s modernization discourses have constructed neoliberal policies as 'the modern' alternative and fetishized the construction of urban infrastructures. Within this discursive landscape, successive failures in achieving the idealized end-state of neoliberalization policies as well as existing infrastructural inadequacies were seen as failures to modernize, as a failure to follow 'the path to Europe'. Consequently, such failures and inadequacies were re-inscribed in neoliberalization discourses. This logic reached its apogee in the aftermath of the 'Greek crisis' when the country's failure to modernize was posited as the sole explanation for its current situation and served as the legitimizing ground

for yet another round of dogmatic neoliberal policies. Building on this discourse, performing neoliberalization was the central strategy in maintaining local and national state legitimacy. Throughout this process “proof of the right of state power [was] identical to the evidence that it only ever [did] the only thing possible, only ever what is required by strict necessity in the context of the growing intricacy of economies within the global market” (Rancière, 1999, pages 112-113).

Second, the paper unearthed how successive rounds of neoliberalization have, through failing forward, reshaped urban infrastructure politics around the port in regenerative and accumulative ways. To begin with, the quasi-privatization reform of 1999 institutionalized market efficiency and financial assessment as the unquestionable guiding principles in producing and governing urban infrastructure. However, the role of the state was not diminished but rather re-organized around the construction of new techno-managerial elites closely linked with the country’s political elites. In the following years, urban infrastructures emerged as a prominent terrain for speculation and capital accumulation. Coupled with financial and banking deregulation, this strategy opened up urban infrastructures to investments by tycoons like Lavrentis Lavrentiadis, further subjugating their governance to speculative moves. Ultimately, this resulted in the consolidation of a close interplay between politico-managerial and economic elites in the country.

Third, and related to the above, the most important effect of the successive rounds of neoliberal policies around the port was the gradual de-politicization of urban infrastructure politics. Discursively, the coupling of neoliberalization and modernization discourses proved a powerful strategy in portraying disagreement

towards ThPA's privatization as a romantic and fundamentalist stance failing to understand what the 'givens of the situation' necessitate. Institutionally, the 1999 reform and the 2008 effort to privatize the container terminal gradually reduced urban infrastructure politics to consensual negotiations between political and state-appointed managerial elites and global and local capitals. In the aftermath of the crisis, the rule of capital and experts was further consolidated to incorporate the techno-managerial elites of the EU-IMF-ECB troika as well as a new host of state-appointed expert consultants crystallized around the HRADF. Brought together these changes, the paper argued, have sought to move urban infrastructure governance beyond democratic accountability and foreclose the institutional and discursive spaces for the expression of democratic disagreement as well as the search for political alternatives.

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