Occasional Paper 9

"Il était un petit navire": The refugee crisis, neo-orientalism, and the production of radical alterity.

Elisabeth Kirtsoglou and Giorgos Tsimouris

Occasioned by

In September 2015 Elisabeth Kirtsoglou, Giorgos Tsimouris, Stavroula Pipyrou, and Daniel Knight were awarded funding by the UK Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) to carry out a comparative study on what has come to be known as the refugee crisis in Greece and Italy.[1] Titled "Transitory Lives: An Anthropological Research of the Mediterranean Migration Crisis" (http://transitorylives.net/) the project is part of a larger ESRC research program and came in response to an urgent call to address the "Mediterranean Migration Crisis."[2] It brings together the universities of Durham, St. Andrews, Panteion, and Messina, academics, non-governmental organizations, and refugee associations from three countries in an effort to engage with a bottom-up approach to displacement. The main academic aim of the project is to challenge border intensification practices and question the distinctions being made currently in the deployment of the terms "migrants" and "refugees" and arguing in favor of a unified approach to systemic forms of political and economic violence.

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Loss and Order

In 2015 alone, half a million refugees reached the eastern shores of Greece while more than three thousand perished in their attempt to cross the Aegean Sea. Their images—the young, the old, the women, the men, the children, the infants, the dead, the alive, the scared, the dehydrated, the drowning, the resuscitated—filled the eyes of the entire world. The collective term of reference used for them in European discourse changed from migrants to refugees and Greek public sentiment gradually followed, as nationalist and xenophobic feelings gave way to rhetorical and practical expressions of solidarity.

Photograph by Giorgos Tsimouris.

In its density and complexity, what was proclaimed as a "refugee crisis" can be seen as a "knot" (cf. Green 2014) where concerns over state sovereignty and supra-national governance (Dines et al, 2014) are connected with complex ontologies of inequality (Fassin 2007) and where questions of value, hope (cf. Narotzky and Besnier 2014), and new forms of citizenship (cf. Balibar 2004; Benhabib 2005) become entangled with the politics of life and death (Athanasiou and Tsimouris, 2013; Green 2010; Last and Spijkerboer 2014; Stefatos et al, 2015).

Towards the end of the 1980s and for most of the 1990s academic discussion on globalization emphasized deterritorialization (Deleuze and Guattari 1987), transnationalization (cf. Hannerz 1989), the "intensification of worldwide social relations" (Giddens 1990: 64), and the "flow" of goods, ideas, and information (Castells 1989; cf. Bernal 2004: 4). Approximately two decades later and fifteen years into the new century, stark spirals of power asymmetry are revealed within and between nations and locations. The ideality of the free flow of capital (Ho 2009) has produced among other things new technologies of labor arbitrage. Internal, national, and supranational borders have proliferated (Balibar 1998; Palladino and Iside Gjergji 2015) and the techniques of controlling them have intensified, introducing both novel and increased constraints on mobility (Green 2013: 355; Fassin 2011: 214; Ferguson 2006).

A closer look at the ambiguities embedded in notions such as "global interconnectedness" and "internationalization" exposes a painful hierarchy among

subjects, regions, and nations that needs to be fully acknowledged in its political, historical, and economic dimensions. On one end of the spectrum of such hierarchies is the celebrated archetype of the constructed globalized subject –a tourist, an executive of a multinational corporation, and sometimes even an anthropologist—who feels equally at home in more than one world locales. The globalized subject embodies modernity and endorses consumption. She stands for progress (understood and deployed variously and differently), and is regarded as possessing the celebrated ability to think and exist beyond national boundaries and fixed categorical groupings. Her alter-ego, the refugee, the migrant, the *sans papier*, is paradoxically denied this kind of mobility. She is constructed as clandestine and deportable (cf. De Genova 2010), what I call (with a nod to Mary Douglas) *matter out of state*, an excess and a violation of national and international law and order, a liminal being. In her liminality she comes to embody transgression and becomes the paradigm of perhaps the most radical form of alterity in the era of (post)modernity.

The difference between the globalized subject and the migrant subject is being constructed and presented in public discourse through a misleading focus on their respective legal statuses which largely serve to conceal fundamental neoliberal concerns with movement and capital. The globalized subject –the tourist, the international organization or multinational corporation employee, the international artist, the academic—moves, and her movement is seen as engineering capital,[3] either directly, through consumption, or through internationalizing production, facilitating local and global entrepreneurship, disseminating ideas, images, science, or technology. This type of movement, so closely related to the creation of "scapes" (Appadurai 1990), fits almost perfectly the Enlightenment ideal of *laissez faire-laissez passer* placed at the heart of capitalist imagery. The migrant subject, born in (what have been construed as) the poor and underdeveloped parts of this cynical new world, constitutes the Janus face of her globalized Other, is reduced to a worker "without work, that is, deprived of the only activity left to [her]" (Fassin 2005: 372; cf. Arendt 1958[1998]: 161-163). This is not to say that migrants do not or cannot create economic capital; who is allowed and who is denied mobility however, and under what circumstances, is part of the radical production of alterity, a process closely associated with the contemporary neoliberal condition as policy, ideology, and governmentality (cf. Larner 2000).

A number of academic works on migration draw their inspiration from Giorgio Agamben and Michel Foucault and in one way or another debate the biopolitical (or thanatopolitical) production of Otherness (Athanasiou and Tsimouris 2013; Dines et.al., 2014; Fassin 2005, 2007, 2011; Green 2013). The camp and the polis, *zoë* and *bios (*cf. Agamben 1998) have come under considerable academic scrutiny in migration studies.[4] In special relation to Greece, works such as those of Leonidas Cheliotis (2013) and Katerina Rozakou (2012) examine the spaces between bare life and full social existence, as these are exemplified in the analytical canon of hospitality, either as a discourse of the conservative neoliberal state, or in the context of humanitarian action. Further work on the "social aesthetics of eligibility" carried out by Heath Cabot (2014) attempts to illuminate new modes of agency as these arise in the legal context of asylum seeking processes. A central theme of most academic approaches to migration—at least within anthropology—is the interplay between the ambiguity of technologies, practices, and procedures and the rigidity of their effects as these are experienced by the subjects on the ground (cf. Cabot 2012). Drawing inspiration from this material, we claim that this paradoxical combination of rigidity and ambiguity engendered in neoliberal governmentality (cf. Foucault 2008) constructs intense experiences of precariousness and a unique regime of fear.

Precariousness, as deployed by Judith Butler (2006), takes various forms. It appears to produce specific effects when combined with profound bureaucratization that involves "agencies, procedures, institutions, legal forms" which proliferate *governance* while staying loyal to the neoliberal principle of a smaller government (cf. Lemke 2001: 191; 2007: 44; Larner 2000) Governmentality as intervention (cf. Foucault 2007), becomes paradigmatic in specific forms of bureaucracy which produce spaces of "indifference" (Herzfeld 1992), biopolitical and thanatopolitical management of human existence, as well as intense feelings of precariousness. Governmentality is thus *felt*, effectuating an almost Kafkaesque aesthetic of uncertainty that becomes palpable in experiences of "loss of control over one's life situation" (Graeber 2014: 76). As bureaucracies and procedures multiply, one's ability to engage in "micro-projects of making a living and enhancing future opportunities" diminishes (Narotzky and Besnier 2014: S8). Precariousness as an almost sensorial effect of governmentality is enacted by structures that appear as flexible but can transform themselves to rigid and unnegotiable. Discursive and practical engagement with this new kind of bureaucracy creates a performative idiom that finds its application in a variety of modern conditions ranging from indebtedness to new labor relations and of course in the production of subjectivities construed and constructed as migrant, deportable, and liminal.

In this sense we fully agree with Neni Panourgiá's observation that "dictatorships in the West no longer happen as a result of military coups and interventions but rather through the hyper-legalization of the minutiae of everyday existence," a hyper-legalization that legitimizes various forms of policing (2009: 8). This hyper-legalization can be seen as a technology which transforms the ordinary into something exceptional and the commonplace into something irregular—and *vice versa*—thereby proliferating ambiguity, precariousness, and fear. The combination of precarity and bureaucratization—of the constructed states of flexibility, ambiguity (and even choice) — with an essentialized rigidity, clarity and definition (and discourses of TINA: There Is No Alternative), is a neoliberal technology of governance *par excellence* that produces and perpetuates hierarchies between hegemonic and subaltern forms of existence.

The fence

In January 2010 the Greek state decided to build a barbed wire wall, referred to as ο φράχτης (*o frahtis,* the fence), in the borders of Thrace with Turkey. The fence would delimit and block access to the land portion of the border, a distance of about 12.5 km, and was conceived as a measure that would putatively control irregular migration into Greece and consequently into the EU. For several years the Greek state promoted a general policy of making the lives of immigrants as difficult as possible in order to project an image of Greece as a state that did not welcome irregular migration. This line of action materialized in a number of individual policies; in the form and shape in which asylum-seeking requests were processed; in sweeping police operations in urban centers; and it resulted in the conviction of Greece for the cruel and degrading treatment of asylum seekers by the European court (cf. Cabot 2012: 12).

On 6 February 2012, the then minister of security (of the New Democracy and PASOK coalition government) Christos Papoutsis visited the area of Evros in order to inaugurate the construction of the fence. As he entered the city of Alexandroupolis he was welcomed by a procession of hearses. The owners of funeral homes demonstrated in this manner their opposition to a new taxation law proposed by the government that

intended to remove hearses from the category of commercial vehicles in order to tax them as luxury items. The protest of the caretakers of Alexandroupolis unintentionally marked the construction of the Evros fence in a prophetic manner. By blocking the land passage from Turkey to Greece, the barbed wire wall in Thrace has effectively resulted in over 3.000 deaths in the Aegean Sea in the summer of 2015 alone. The Evros fence is another testimony of how border intensification merely redirects migration routes, frequently to more dangerous passages that claim ever more human lives (De Bruycker et al 2013: 4; Fekete 2003; Grant 2011; Triandafyllidou 2010).

On 31 October 2015, a country-wide protest against the fence originated in the towns of Kastanies and Orestiada (near the Turkish border in Thrace). Posters calling people to the protest appeared in various cities and towns in the country, both in the mainland and on the islands. They shared a common slogan: "Στὸν φράχτη του Έβρου, στον πάτο του Αιγαίου, χτίζεται η ασφάλεια του κάθε ευρωπαίου" (On the Evros fence, in the bottom of the Aegean Sea, this is where each European citizen's security is constructed).
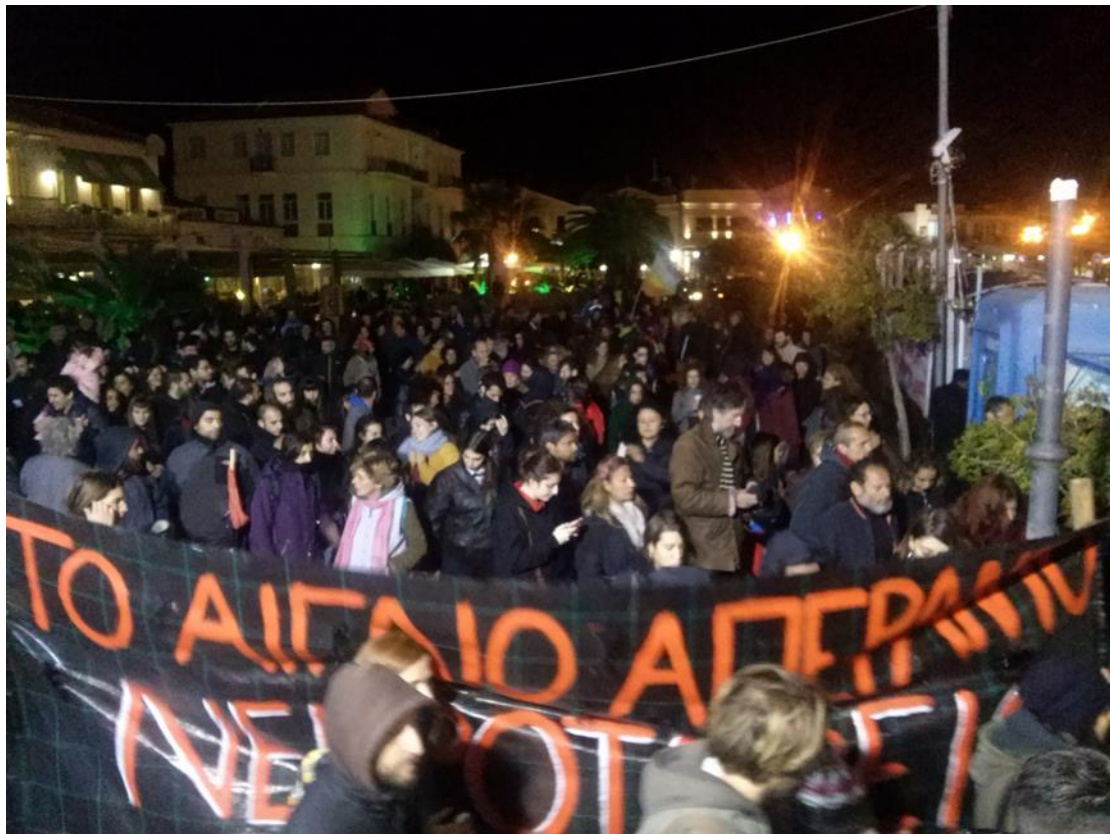
Lesvos, 31 October 2015. Photograph taken by George Tyrikos-Ergas. Used with permission.

This slogan has been used for over a year by a variety of groups that could be called leftist activists at the forefront of social movements. In Greek everyday discourse such groups are colloquially categorized as belonging to the anti-establishment political spectrum (αντιεξουσιαστικός χώρος), and indeed some of them adopt the term "anti-establishment" as part of their public profile, usually by calling themselves an αντιεξουσιαστική κίνηση (*antiexousiastiki kinisi*, anti-establishment movement). The verb used when the slogan first appeared was κρύβεται (*kryvetai*, is hiding) instead of χτίζεται (*htizetai*, is constructed) thus alluding to the sinister motivations behind the construction of the fence.

We consider this slogan to be a fine example of organic intellectual production, as it evolved from "is hiding" to the much richer term "is constructed." The literal translation of χτίζεται is "is being constructed" or "is being built," but whichever translation one might prefer, the slogan articulates a social critique of a number of important dimensions of the migration context.
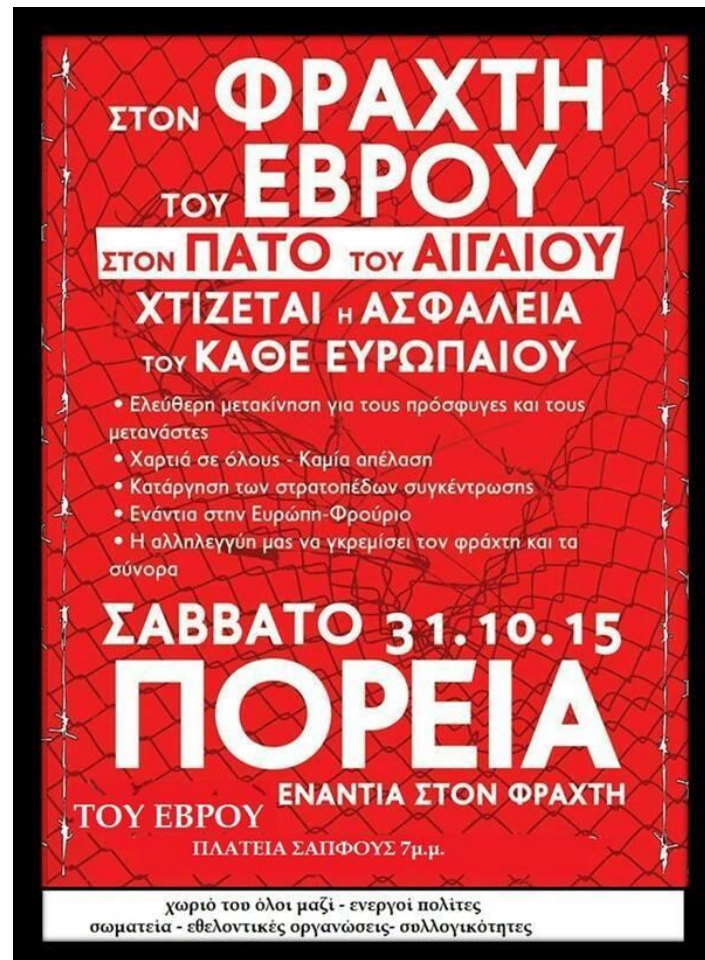
Poster announcing the 31 October 2015 demonstration against the fence.

What Heath Cabot (2012) has identified as the "legal limbo" of migrants/refuges, asylum seekers, and the san papiers points to the condition of these subjects as "matter out of place" (Rozakou 2012: 568), or matter out of state. As Rozakou points out, these victims of a violence that is equally political and economic, these liminal objects of globalization, are consistently portrayed as occupying a no man's land between the politico-jural order and bare life, revealing the polis *and* the camp as "the two sides of contemporary democracies" (Fassin 2005: 381). In fact, as the slogan rightly suggests, the camp as the materialization of the (bio)political paradigm of modernity, is nothing but the polis's interior exclusion (Fuss 1992). The camps, the proliferating border, the bottom of the sea, are not the opposite poles of the polis, *bios*, social and political life. They are the very idioms where the neoliberal model of a polis is being produced. The modern citizen of capitalism is born (to borrow from Foucault) as a species out of the conditions of radical alterity and intense precarity of the human being next to her.

In the new, current context where the social contract is being dissolved (cf. Kirtsoglou 2010), where frequently one cannot see how "the fundamental social institutions that

surround us—police, schools . . . or financial institutions— exist for our benefit"
(Graeber 2014: 76), citizenship is increasingly established in the public consciousness
through its distinction to the 'non-citizenship' of the migrant subject. In a climate of
insecurity exacerbated by the international financial crisis, and state and non-state
terrorism, one person's perceived security is experienced relative to another person's
precarity. Ultimately, in an era when the definition of what constitutes a "worthy life"
(Narotzky and Besnier 2014) and the question of whether this can ever be achieved are
not straightforward matters; the realization of our very existence passes partly through
the perishing Other. What is established and performatively constructed at the fence of
Evros and at the bottom of the Aegean Sea is more than just state sovereignty, borders,
or the current biopolitical and/or thanatopolitical paradigm. The ecstatic temporality
(Heidegger cf. 1927[1968]) of other people's precarious journeys and impersonal deaths
is where both our *bios* and *zoë* are being produced and enacted, while the difference
between them is being rapidly and blatantly reduced to the bare minimum.

Radical Alterity and Neo-orientalism

In a 2013 article, Daniel M. Knight examines the multiple Greek crises as a "political
trope" employed by other national governments in an effort to shock their populations
and distract them for economic troubles at home. In an eloquent and refreshing analysis
of the construction of the stereotype of Greeks as lazy and corrupt, Knight demonstrates
how the country was portrayed as the cause rather than as a symptom of the Eurozone
crisis in order to silence the resistance of Northern European publics to austerity
measures taken locally. Knight names this process of weaving narratives of blame and
accountability around essentialist ideas about cultures and economies a kind of
"*methodological nationalism*" (2013: 148, our emphasis). We adopt this term and expand it
somewhat to signify the processes by which radical alterity is produced with the ultimate
aim of defining the Self relationally, in its supposed drastic difference from the Other.[5]

Critical events (such as the economic or the migration crises) at the margins of the state
(Das and Poole 2004) or in the periphery of the supra-national coalition become political
tropes and markers of difference and similarity, contexts for the active production of
neoliberal historicity. The unfolding refugee crisis (as it has come to be called) as a
transformation of what was once called "the migration crisis" comes with its attendant
paraphernalia. At present it constitutes a newly-found European sensitivity to the loss of
human lives. Conventionally, it signified the widespread moral panic about what is called
and perceived as radical Islam which will most probably return ever stronger after the
tragic attacks in Paris on 13 November 2015. Almost always the movement of
populations from Africa, the Middle East, or Asia into Europe is connected to images of
extreme poverty and underdevelopment.[6] Each one of these movements and images, in
its simplicity, serves as a convenient "story-seed" (cf. Knight 2013: 153) and as a
distorting lens around which alterity is constructed in the form of a hegemonic neo-
Orientalism. This new kind of Orientalism sits conveniently on old and well-rehearsed
stereotypes that have embedded themselves in history and collective European
consciousness. The image of a continuously troubled East, the stereotype of the
fundamentalist, obscurantist Muslim Other in constant need of modernization,
democratization, and international intervention, or simply the victim of economic
underdevelopment who seeks a better life in paradise-Europe, are perfect examples of
the relationship between rhetoric and the workings of power (cf. Kirtsoglou 2010) .

This new Orientalism established through methodological nationalism is raw, self-referential, and self-fulfilling in the most narcissistic sense. The refugee who risks her life and the lives of her children in order to reach the shores of Lesvos and from there continues her onward agonizing journey to the states of central and northern Europe embodies the effects of global hegemony. In our collective imagery, she becomes the personification of Deleuze and Guattari's (1987) wasp: she is portrayed as a deterritorialized entity and her journey from east to west—the former perceived as distraught, the latter as accomplished— is deployed as a trope for their asymmetrical relations of power. We follow Edward Said's (1978) line of argument that the West and the Orient, neoliberalism and any attempt to contemplate alternative forms of existence cannot be adequately understood as contrasting dichotomies. They are not opposed to each other. They form a rhizome, a complex symbolic space where modern political subjectivities are produced and performed in *relation* to some imagined forms of radical alterity. Methodological nationalism can, then, be regarded as an apparatus that allows the extreme to produce and define the mainstream (cf. Tsimouris 2015) in a process by which the distance between the two becomes smaller and smaller following the gradual collapsing of *bios* into *zoë* as a general canon of neoliberal orthodoxy (cf. Habermas 2006).

The very use of the term crisis—usually accompanied by the term humanitarian— is not itself unrelated to neo-Orientalism. What is happening in the Aegean is rarely being examined as a symptom of the problematic concept of Fortress Europe (cf. Palladino and Gjergji 2015) that has transformed borderlands into proliferating (bio)political spaces. Discursive strategies that rest on migrant flows, the inadequacy of the reception structures, crisis, emergency, smuggling networks, inadequate dinghies and inexperienced refugees who cannot navigate the high seas—in as much as all of the above are important aspects of the micro-structure of migration—have two main consequences. First, they locate the cause of the problem somewhere other than EU and national border policies. Mobility—an essential feature that defines the modern globalized subject—is presented by governments and policy-makers as a kind of luxury for the undeserving Other. Second, by focusing on the management of migration analysis and accountability becomes lost in the folds of the cloak that covers the reasons behind the exodus of persons from their homelands. The multiple terms used to describe these subjects—refugee, migrant, irregular, clandestine, and so forth—lock any analytical attempt into an aesthetic of eligibility (cf. Cabot 2013) hindering the development of public critique of the role of the "Western great powers" of capitalism and imperialism in the global political and economic order (cf. Kirtsoglou and Theodossopoulos 2010: 108; Kirtsoglou and Theodossopoulos 2013).

Unilaterally designed and decided interventions in certain parts of the world (but not in others) in combination with painful histories of economic extraction that have resulted in the unequal development of countries and locales is hardly ever discussed outside academic circles. By reducing migration to its managerial components (routes, means, finances, Frontex Europe) conveniently silences its roots and causes (Zetter 1988: 6), the what, the where, the why and the who, ultimately portraying the Orient as a space that breeds war, violence, persecution, and poverty. By default, Europe and the developed (read: capitalist) world verifies and auto-legitimizes its superiority, concealing its own responsibilities and geostrategic role in the staging of wars and violence.

Lesvos. Photograph taken by George Tyrikos-Ergas. Used with permission.

What the native knows[7]: a closing remark

Neither Tsimouris nor Kirtsoglou are researching and writing on the issue of displacement as neutral subjects. Each of us in our own different ways has been defined by migration, refugeeness, exile, exclusion, and peripheral positionality, professionally and/or personally. We are not alone in this. Although no one can deny the existence of Nazi re-activism, nationalism, xenophobia, and racism in Greek public culture, feelings of empathy and identification with refugees profoundly expressed by ordinary citizens deserve to be acknowledged. The summer of 2015 has been for Greece one of the most difficult and intense periods of the last decades. A large number of Greek people experienced history-in-the-making as a condition of multitemporality (cf. Knight 2013, 2015), where past and present experiences of wars, famines, destitution, and geopolitical dependence wove themselves in the same messy collective narrative of a country which—against all odds—decided to maintain its deep connection with Europe, even as its perpetually unequal partner (cf. Kirtsoglou 2006).

In this light, many Greek citizens saw the predicament of the refugees who managed to cross the sea mapped onto the spectrum of the Self as a descendant of the displaced of the 1922 Asia Minor war who had crossed that same sea. *Prosfygiá (*refugeeness) as collective narrative (cf. Hirschon 1989; Tsimouris 1998) and transgenerational trauma (cf. Anastasiadis 2012) has become for a large part of Greek society a mechanism of *substitution*, in the way in which Levinas, has talked about the process of putting oneself in the place of another (1981). A number of people identified with the stranger as an *other* human being- in- need similar to the Self. Encounters with refugees caused to large segments of people feelings of empathy that ought not to be confused with compassion, pity, or sympathy any of which can effectively displace the recognition of social and political rights (Fassin 2005; Rozakou 2012). Empathy as identification articulated in manifold ways can also relate to the recognition that both the self and the other exist in similar conditions of precarity, alterity, and tantalizing ambiguity. One's subjective

position— *relative* safety—proves to be a matter of luck rather than the effect of choices perceived as right and moves deemed to be correct. As such, the realization of our common precarity constitutes perhaps the most important demystification that can take place in contemporary times. Empathy as identification can transform precariousness into an idiom of resistance, crashing the concept of radical alterity as a foundation myth of capitalist modernity.

In this paper we tried to show how precariousness, bureaucratization, ambiguity, flexibility (and even change in its capacity to come suddenly and unpredictably) serve to construct perpetual dichotomies between notions of the Self and constructions of the Other. These dichotomies, presented as radical alterity, conceal the foundations of inequality and dependency, and legitimize discourses of TINA. Above all they contribute to the cultivation of an intense climate of uncertainty and a widespread politics of fear. Seen from one perspective what is established in the fence of Evros and the bottom of the Aegean Sea is not the security of European citizens but their *relative* security that comes at the cost of accommodating neoliberal demands. The migration or –refugee– crisis in all of its tragedy and capacity to move and sensitize (precisely because of that) has been transformed into another technology of subjugation, one of many (con)texts for the production of modern neoliberal subjectivities. In the next protest the slogan should perhaps be slightly modified once again: *On the fence of Evros, at the bottom of the Aegean Sea, this is where the subjugation of every European citizen is established* (Στὸν φράχτη του Ἔβρου, στον πάτο του Αιγαίου, χτίζετ' η υποδούλωση του κάθε ευρωπαίου).

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NOTES

[1] The first part of our title "*Il était un petit navire* " ("once upon a time there was a little ship") comes from a popular nineteenth century French children's song (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pHNiPMO5q_s). Its Greek version, «Ἤταν ἕνα μικρὸ καράβι», is also very popular in Greece and one of the first songs to be learned by young children. The song, in both versions, is sung in a group and tells the story of a little ship's first travel in the Mediterranean Sea; when food on board becomes scarce the crew draws lots to see "who will be eaten" (« ποιὸς θα φαγωθεί»).

[2] There is a lot to be said about the use of the term "crisis," both in the title of the funding call and in our project title that was forced to match it. There are specific problems associated with the use of terms like "crisis" and the manner in which such terms contribute to ideas about "emergency" and reinforce efforts to create "states of exception" (cf. Agamben 2005). We hope that the publications produced out of this collaborative work, including the present paper, will help to partly address these problems.

[3] We are using the term engineering on purpose to signify the ways in which capital is not only produced, or generated, but also manufactured through techniques such as hedging, leverage, and the creation of new financial products.

4 As Panourgiá, echoing Derrida, points out, Agamben has perhaps overstated the distinction between *zoë* and *bios* which is far more "tricky and precarious" than conceived in Agamben's work (Derrida 2005: 24 cited in Panourgiá 2009: 113, Parergon 22). Here we note our agreement with this criticism, both in ethnographic and in theoretical terms.

5 It is important to note here that the politics of radical alterity in relation to the financial crisis—exemplified in the concept of PIGS (P.I.G.S.: Portugal, Italy, Greece, Spain) and of an assumed idiosyncratic South European periphery— fuelled in Greece a new cycle of methodological nationalism vis–à–vis Europe. Strongly expressed anti–European sentiments and discourses produced anti–narratives of equally radical alterity towards the Germans and other nations of the so–called European core (cf. Tsimouris 2015).

6 This point was driven home when the Greek public at large appeared quite surprised at the realization that Syrian refugees had mobile phones and tablets. The association of migration with poverty (instead of economic violence) has another detrimental effect: the formulation of the question—usually posed by extreme right–wing circles– "if they are so poor where did they find the money to pay the smugglers?"

7 "What the native knows" is an allusion to Argyrou 2002.

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