

## Γεωγραφίες

Αρ. 28 (2016)

Γεωγραφίες, Τεύχος 28, 2016



### LABOR'S SPATIAL PRAXIS AND THE ECONOMIC GEOGRAPHY OF THE GREEK CRISIS

Andrew Herod

# LABOR'S SPATIAL PRAXIS AND THE ECONOMIC GEOGRAPHY OF THE GREEK CRISIS

**Andrew Herod<sup>1</sup>**

## Abstract

In this paper I first outline some of the tenets of what has come to be called, in the Anglophonic world, Labor Geography. This is an approach to understanding the making of the economic geography of capitalism which sees workers as geographical agents whose political-economic behavior is both shaped by the spatiality of the landscapes within which they must live but which also reworks those landscapes in ways not imagined by either capital or the state. The second part of the paper briefly outlines two case studies of Greek workers playing active roles in remaking the economic geography of Greece during the crisis. The paper, then, suggests that worker agency will be important for creating more emancipatory landscapes as the crisis unfolds and that we should not just focus upon the actions of capital and the state to understand the economic geography of the crisis.

## Χωρικές πρακτικές των εργαζόμενων και η οικονομική γεωγραφία της ελληνικής κρίσης

### Περίληψη

Σε αυτό το άρθρο παρουσιάζω καταρχήν μερικά από τα αξιώματα του πεδίου που έχει πλέον ονοματιστεί, τουλάχιστον στον Αγγλόφωνο ακαδημαϊκό κόσμο, ως Γεωγραφία της Εργασίας. Η Γεωγραφία της Εργασίας είναι ένας τρόπος κατανόησης της οικονομικής γεωγραφίας του καπιταλισμού που αντιλαμβάνεται του εργαζόμενους ως γεωγραφικά ενεργούς δρώντες. Δρώντες των οποίων η πολιτικο-οικονομική συμπεριφορά διαμορφώνεται από την χωρικότητα των τοπίων εντός των οποίων πρέπει να ζήσουν και εργαστούν, αλλά, ταυτόχρονα, διαμορφώνει αυτά τα τοπία με τρόπους που υπερβαίνουν τα σχέδια και τις επιλογές κεφαλαίου και κράτους. Στη συνέχεια του άρθρου παρουσιάζω, εν συντομίᾳ, δύο μελέτες περίπτωσης στο πλαίσιο των οποίων εργάτες στην Ελλάδα παίζουν ενεργό ρόλο στον επανακαθορισμό της οικονομικής γεωγραφίας της χώρας, την περίοδο της κρίσης. Το άρθρο ολοκληρώνεται υποστηρίζοντας ότι η δράση και αντίσταση των εργαζομένων θα είναι σημαντικός παράγοντας για τη δημιουργία περισσότερο χειραφετικών οικονομικο-πολιτικών τοπίων, καθώς η κρίση εξελίσσεται και πως δεν θα πρέπει να εστιάσουμε αποκλειστικά στις δράσεις κεφαλαίου και κράτους για να κατανοήσουμε την οικονομική γεωγραφία της κρίσης.

### Introduction

The new economic geography of Southern Europe more broadly –and Greece specifically— that is emerging out of the crisis has frequently been presented as being the product of the actions of capital and of the state. In terms of the former, a popular narrative has been that of how the banking sector has been busy reshaping the economies of countries such as Greece through its investment decisions, both in terms of helping to bring about the crisis and then in terms of responses to it. Hence, although the current global and Greek economic crises are in fact the result of deep and on-going problems with capital accumulation (Shaikh 2011), the crisis's initial public phase is frequently seen to have been brought on by the actions of French bank BNP Paribas when, on August 9, 2007, it prohibited withdrawals from three hedge funds due to its fear that they lacked sufficient liquidity. These actions subsequently led to a geographically widespread banking panic that was manifested in such things as a run on the

1. Distinguished Research Professor of Geography, Adjunct Professor of International Affairs and Anthropology, Department of Geography, University of Georgia, Athens, GA, USA, aherod@uga.edu.

British bank Northern Rock – the first run on a major British bank since the 19th century (Elliott 2012). BNP Paribas's actions themselves were a response to instability in the financial sector brought about because, for several years previously, banks and other financial institutions had been making investment gambles in the housing market, using new financial instruments (such as mortgage-backed securities, credit default swaps, and over-the-counter derivatives) which few people – including the bankers – really understood and without sufficient capital to pay off their debts should their gambles not pay off. Equally, the financial sector has been seen to have exacerbated the crisis once it emerged – for instance, a widely reported story in *Bloomberg Business* (Martinuzzi and Penty 2012) recounted how, five years after the emergence of the crisis, Goldman Sachs Group Inc., the largest stock underwriter in Europe, declined to underwrite bank restructurings in Spain, Portugal, and Italy for fear that it would have too little control over these latter institutions should they fail, actions which shaped capital flows and lines of corporate control within and across the continent.

Whereas the banks, then, have been seen by many as major players in remaking the economic geography of Southern Europe, so, too, have various segments of the state. For instance, many observers have faulted the Greek government for spending too much money, for failing to implement a modern system of taxation and revenue generation, and for systematically and deliberately undercounting data on its debt levels and deficits (for more on explanations of the Greek case, see Mavroudeas 2015). Such actions led many financial institutions to worry about lending Greece additional funds, such that by 2010 the country was veering towards bankruptcy and required bailout assistance from the International Monetary Fund, the European Central Bank, and the European Commission (the so-called “Troika”). Such bailouts were conditioned upon the imposition of harsh austerity measures, the streamlining of government functions, ending tax evasion, and making Greece more “business friendly.” Likewise, in Spain many have suggested that a central element in that country’s crisis was the government’s relaxation of regulations governing the banking sector, such that Spanish banks were able to violate International Accounting Standards Board requirements and hide sig-

nificant losses (Weil 2012). These activities led the Spanish government to seek help from the European Stability Mechanism, an intergovernmental organization that provided monies for a bank recapitalization program. The *quid pro quos* upon which The Troika and other entities of the European Union have insisted for making loans to various Southern European governments – market liberalizations and austerity in return for financial support – have dramatically shaped, then, how the region’s economic landscapes are evolving as we move into the 21st century.

Certainly, the activities of these actors are crucial in producing the new economic geography of Europe. What is far less frequently recognized, however, is that the actions of workers are also important in shaping the new economic geographies that are emerging as the crisis continues. From street demonstrations to strikes to smaller-scale forms of resistance like continuing to avoid paying taxes (which many workers view as a form of protest against the economic prescriptions laid out by The Troika), workers and their supporters are playing key roles in remaking Southern Europe’s economic landscapes. These workers’ actions raise important questions about how we understand the ways in which the economic geography of Southern Europe is presently being reconstituted. Consequently, in this paper I seek to do several things. First, I outline some of the ways in which critical geographers have thought about the relationship between the exercise of political power and the spatiality of capitalism. In particular, I detail some of the neo-Marxist work which has argued that the way in which the geography of capitalism is made is central to how capitalism as an economic system functions. I then explore some of the arguments made by various self-described “Labor Geographers” about how workers, too, play roles in shaping how the unevenly developed economic geography of capitalism is made in particular ways. Finally, I present two brief case studies on Greek workers’ actions during the crisis and how such actions are important to not overlook if we are to understand how the new economic geography of Greece is being made.

#### *Capital and the Making of the Unevenly Developed Geography of Capitalism*

Questions of the relationship between power and the structuring of the landscape have long interested

thinkers. The ancient Greeks, for instance, saw the *agora* of their cities as “the...centered space that permitted all citizens to affirm themselves as *isoī* (equals), and *homoioi* (peers), and to enter with one another into a relation of identity, symmetry, and reciprocity [as part of] a united *cosmos*” (Naddaf 2005). For their part, Roman city planners sought to impose order on the built environment – and, by implication, upon society as a whole – by using grid systems and building codes as they laid out their cities. Meanwhile, the Conquistadors saw urban spaces as their indelible link to civilization, such that colonial Spanish cities were usually laid out on a grid – the central plaza in such cities served as both a marketplace but also as a place of execution, activities which emphasized the power of the Crown over the empire’s economy and its individual subjects (Burkholder and Johnson 2003: 236). However, it is to more recent thinking about the relationships between the exercise of political power and the making of the landscape in particular ways that I wish to turn for pondering how workers’ actions are playing important roles in reshaping the economic landscapes of Southern Europe during the crisis. In what follows, then, I detail some of the important theoretical work that has been done by neo-Marxist geographers to make connections between how capitalism as a political-economic system functions and the making of its geography. In order to do so, in this section of the paper I first begin with a brief discussion of the work of Michel Foucault and Henri Lefebvre, two French intellectuals with considerable interests in questions of space and power. I then outline some of the work conducted by a number of Anglophonic geographers, beginning in the 1970s, to link the social relations of capitalism with its spatial structures.

#### *Preliminaries – Space & Power*

Since the 1970s many neo-Marxist Anglophonic geographers have been interested in matters of space and power. Two of the major theoretical influences upon much early work were Foucault and Lefebvre. Importantly, though, whereas both Foucault and Lefebvre developed important insights into the relationship between space and power, they were interested in slightly different sets of questions.

For his part, Foucault was principally interested in how the human body is disciplined in space, especially

in the institutions of the modern age – prisons, schools, factories, workplaces, and so forth. Specifically, he concerned himself with how institutions’ physical layouts have often been designed to control the behavior of those contained within them, suggesting that this was accomplished by two separate, but connected, processes – those which enclose and those which divide spaces. Hence, he maintained (1975 [1977]: 141, 143), discipline “sometimes requires [spatial] *enclosure*, the specification of a place heterogeneous to all others and closed in upon itself,” whilst at other times it relies upon partitioning space as a way to “break up collective dispositions [and] eliminate...the uncontrolled disappearance of individuals [i.e., individuals’ ability to make themselves invisible to those monitoring them], their diffuse circulation, their unusable and dangerous coagulation [and] to establish presences and absences, to know where and how to locate individuals, to set up useful communications, to interrupt others, to be able at each moment to supervise the conduct of each individual, to assess it, to judge it, to calculate its qualities or merits.” Put another way, by enclosing spaces the powers that be can control who enters and exits certain spaces whilst by partitioning spaces they can keep individuals separate so as to reduce the likelihood that they can create any kind of collective consciousness. For instance, when considering the workplace, the enclosure of a factory with a wall or fence allows the factory owner to control who enters (workers) and who is kept out (perhaps union organizers) whereas partitions inside the workplace can keep workers separated as part of a “divide and conquer” strategy (for actual examples, see: Biggs 1995; van Meel 2000; Andrzejewski 2008). The result, he suggested (p. 141), is that “[d]iscipline proceeds from the distribution of individuals in space”, for “[s]pace is fundamental in any exercise of power” (1984: 252).

Whereas Foucault was interested in what we might call the micro-geographies of power and how space can be shaped at a very local scale to discipline workers’ – and others’ – bodies, Lefebvre was far more interested in the broader machinations of capitalism and how the production of space is central to what he called the “survival of capitalism.” Thus, he argued, capitalism has a particular geography to it and the landscapes produced under it – shaped, as they are, by things like the commodification of land – look different than the land-

scapes produced under, say, feudalism or central planning of the Soviet type. In two particularly influential books – his 1973 *La survie du capitalisme; la re-production des rapports de production* (published in English in 1976 as *The Survival of Capitalism: The Reproduction of the Relations of Production*) and his 1974 *La production de l'espace* (published in English in 1991 as *The Production of Space*) – Lefebvre argued (1974 [1991]: 53, 59) that “[e]very society produces a space, its own space” and that, therefore, “new social relationships call for a new space, and vice versa.” In such a socio-spatial dialectic (Soja 1980), “[s]pace is a (social) product...[It] serves as a tool of thought and of action...[I]t is also a means of control, and hence of domination, of power” (Lefebvre 1974 [1991]: 26). From this, Lefebvre argued two important points. First, he suggested (1973 [1976]: 21) that capital is able to manage – though not completely resolve – its internal contradictions by producing landscapes in particular ways. Second, he averred that there is a dialectical link between the mode of production and the landscape, such that not only does the landscape encapsulate the contradictions of the political-economic system under which it is produced but the manner in which it is produced thereby shapes how the mode of production evolves. This leads to a third argument for Lefebvre (1974 [1991]: 54) with regard to the exercise of political power, namely that any social “revolution that does not produce a new space has not realized its full potential; indeed, it has failed in that it has not changed life itself, but has merely changed ideological superstructures, institutions or political apparatuses.” For a social transformation to be “truly revolutionary in character, [then, it] must manifest a creative capacity in its effects on daily life, on language *and on space*.”

#### *Critical Geography and Theorizing Labor*

Beginning in the early 1970s, several Anglophonic Marxist geographers began to examine more closely the making of the geography of capitalism. They had three principle aims in so doing. First, they wanted to provide a perspective that did not simply view the economic geography of capitalism from the point of view of capitalists making investment decisions in which, as British geographer Doreen Massey (1973: 34) argued, “profit is the criterion, wages are simply labour costs.”

Second, they wanted to tie in the production of capitalism’s economic landscapes with the structural forces of capitalism itself, showing that the landscapes which are produced under capitalism are not merely accidental but reflections of deeper dynamics within the mode of production. Third, whereas economic geographers up until that point had largely drawn upon neo-classical theory to explain the form of the economic landscape and had viewed the economic landscape largely as an inert stage upon which social actors interacted – as Foucault (1980: 177) put it, in such an approach “[s]pace was treated as the dead, the fixed, the undialectical, the immobile. Time, on the contrary, was richness, fecundity, life, dialectic” – these early Marxist geographers suggested that how the economic landscape is structured is both a reflection of processes of capital accumulation but also constitutive of such processes. Thus, Massey (1984: x) argued that “[t]he geography of a society makes a difference to the way it works...It is not just that the spatial is socially constructed; the social is spatially constructed too.” In this regard, she outlined an approach which visualized capital investment being laid down in almost geological terms, like sedimentary rocks, with such layers interacting with the pre-existing economic landscape.

Meanwhile, in the United States, David Harvey (1973; 1976; 1978) was also seeking to both shake up what he viewed as the conservative academic discipline of Geography and to seek to understand the spatial dynamics of capitalism – that is to say, he wanted to Marxify Geography and to spatialize Marx. Developing the concept of what he called the “spatial fix”, he argued (1982) that capitalists must create a particular geographical configuration of the means of production and consumption for accumulation to take place – they must collectively ensure that workers and raw materials can be brought together in the same place so that production can occur and that goods can get to markets so that they may be purchased and profits realized. This frequently involves the state, which generally constructs much of the infrastructure like roads and bridges which individual capitalists do not find profitable to construct but which are nevertheless essential to their goals.

Following from Harvey, Neil Smith (1984 [1990]) argued that the unevenly developed landscapes pro-

duced under capitalism are not the result of the impossibility of even development but are, rather, integrally connected to how capitalism functions as an economic system. In particular, he maintained that there is an inherent tension within the very structure of capital, between capitalists' need to be fixed in particular places so that accumulation may take place and their desire to retain sufficient mobility to be able to move somewhere else should opportunities for higher profit rates arise. This tension leads to some places becoming more developed and others underdeveloped, although this situation can be quite fluid – underdeveloped places can become focal points for capital investment whilst already-developed places can be underdeveloped through capital flight. Hence, for Smith (1986: 94) the landscape under capitalism "is not a dead 'factor'." Instead, it "comes alive neither as a separate thing, field or container but as an integral creation of the material relations of society." Consequently, the fundamental question is "not just...what capitalism does to geography but rather...what geography can do for capitalism [and how] the geographical configuration of the landscape contribute[s] to the survival of capitalism" (Smith 1984 [1990]: xiii).

These and other writers played important roles in theorizing how the economic landscape is made under capitalism, showing how the landscape's form is fundamentally moulded by the actions of capital and how, in turn, its form shapes the possibilities for capital's actions – capital must engage with a highly unevenly developed landscape as it seeks to secure surplus value, for instance. However, their approach largely focused upon capital as the active agent making the geography of capitalism and were, in this regard, rather capital-centric. For example, Harvey (1978: 124, emphasis added) suggested that capital "represents itself in the form of a physical landscape *created in its own image* [and] builds a physical landscape appropriate to its own condition at a particular moment in time." For his part, Smith (1984 [1990]: xv, emphasis added) averred that the geography of uneven development "derives specifically from the opposed tendencies, *inherent in capital*, towards the differentiation but simultaneous equalization of the levels and conditions of production," with the result that what capital "achieves in fact is the *production of space* in its own image."

### *Labor and the Making of the Unevenly Developed Geography of Capitalism*

The work of Marxist geographers like Massey, Harvey, and Smith, together with others, was essential to developing a more critical understanding of the relationship between the internal workings of the capitalist mode of production and the making of economic landscapes. It was also important for recognising the constitutive role played by the landscape in how the mode of production functions. Their work collectively explored the operation of what Soja (1980) called capitalism's socio-spatial dialectic, in which the social relations of capitalism shape how its spatial structures are made but those spatial structures, in turn, shape how the social relations of capitalism develop. However, by the early 1990s a new generation of Marxist geographers had begun to feel that such capital-centric explanations of why the geography of capitalism looks the way it does were lacking. In particular, they argued that it was also important to take into consideration the role of workers as active geographical agents who also play a part in producing the economic geography of the capitalist mode of production. Adopting the terminology of the "spatial fix" developed by Harvey, such self-described "Labor Geographers" determined to explore how workers seek to make their own spatial fixes and so to shape the geography of capitalism. In so doing they adapted Marx's (1852 [1963]) famous aphorism from the *Eighteenth Brumaire* to suggest that "Workers make their own geographies, but they do not make them just as they please; they do not make them under circumstances chosen by themselves, but under circumstances directly encountered, given and transmitted from the past. The landscapes made by all the dead generations weigh like a nightmare on the brain of the living."

Such Labor Geographers have argued that, just like capital, workers must engage with the unevenly developed geography of capitalism to create their own spatial fixes (for more on some of the key arguments, see: Herod 2001; Lier 2007; Rutherford 2010; Coe and Jordhus-Lier 2011). This is because, just like capital, they live lives which are shaped by significant geographical tensions. Thus, on the one hand, they are spatially embedded in particular places so that they may reproduce themselves socially and biologically on a

daily and generational basis – i.e., they must live somewhere (they do not exist on the head of a pin) and, as social beings, they are enmeshed in various social relationships (family, friends, jobs), which all have spatialities to them. On the other hand, they may be forced to consider moving across the landscape, either on a daily basis (such as short commutes from home to work) or perhaps more permanently (as when they migrate from one place to another in search of work, a process which may cause them to break some of the bonds linking them to the locality which they are leaving and which will cause them to have to develop new bonds linking them to the localities to which they are now moving). Through their actions, however, workers can shape how the geography of capitalism is made, as when they struggle to secure investment in their communities or to pressure the government to build infrastructure like roads and housing in particular places. In this regard, then, they must be seen as active geographical agents whose preferred plans for how to organize the economic landscape may be very different to those of capitalists – whereas capitalists may want to see investment leave a community for potentially higher profits elsewhere, workers may struggle to keep it in a particular community.

In contemplating how workers' visions of how the economic landscape should be made can often be quite different from those of capitalists, it is also important, though, to recognize that just as different capitalists may have varying opinions as to how capitalism's economic geography should be constituted so, too, different groups of workers may have quite different visions for how this geography should be made. Workers, in other words, are not a monolithic bloc with a single set of interests. For instance, whereas one group of workers may struggle to keep investment in their communities, workers in other communities may work hard to entice capital to relocate to their communities. In other words, one community's gain is often another's loss. Likewise, some workers may wish to migrate elsewhere, thereby finding jobs and so shaping what kinds of work gets done in particular places (in many parts of the world, for instance, the local economy can only function thanks to the availability of migrant workers) whereas workers with nativist or xenophobic tendencies in those destination communities may work hard to keep such migrants out for various reasons – fear of

competition for jobs, a dislike of people from other cultures, and so forth.

Whilst conflicts over the physical location of investment, jobs, and infrastructure are central elements in workers' influence on how the economic geography of capitalism is made, it is also important to recognize that workers also shape the production of the spatiality of capitalism through their struggles to control the geographical scale at which decisions are made. For instance, some may urge that particular policies and regulations should be set at the national level so that all parts of a country are covered under the same set of rules whereas others may prefer particular decisions be made at the municipal or regional level because they believe that this gives them greater flexibility of action by better reflecting local conditions. Equally, they may seek to develop new geographical scales of their own social organization. For example, in the United States the dockers who work the ports of the East Coast traditionally negotiated their contracts on a port-by-port basis – New York dockers negotiated with New York employers, dockers in Boston negotiated with that port's employers, dockers in New Orleans negotiated with the employers in the Port of New Orleans, and so forth (for more details, see Herod 1997). Beginning in the 1950s, however, this situation began to change in response to the introduction of containerization into the industry. Although containerization threatened to decimate jobs on the waterfronts all along the coast, its effects were first felt in New York, the East Coast's largest port. Consequently, dockers there negotiated several job-saving and wage agreements with their employers. However, they quickly realized that if they only had these agreements in New York then the shipping companies could bring in goods through other nearby ports, like Boston and Philadelphia, and undermine the agreement in New York. As a result, the union set about trying to develop a new geographical scale of bargaining, moving from the old port-by-port system to a national agreement which would cover all of the East Coast ports. This eliminated the employers' abilities to play dockers in different ports against each other because all dockers along the coast would now be paid the same hourly wage. In so doing, it transformed the economic geography of the industry.

The creation of a national system of bargaining, though, was not the end of the story. After a few

decades of this, some dockers in ports along the Gulf of Mexico believed that they needed to break out of this system so that they could once again negotiate their wage rates locally rather than nationally, because they feared competition coming locally from lower-paid, non-union dockers. This, too, helped shape the economic geography of the industry, both in terms of the geography of wage rates but also patterns of cargo shipping, as shippers diverted their cargoes to ports in the Gulf to take advantage of these lower wages. What this all means, then, is that dockers in the Gulf at one time saw their interests best served by helping to create a national system of wage bargaining in the industry (thereby increasing their wages and local spending power, with all of the consequences that this had for their local communities) whereas later they saw advantages to breaking out of that system and switching back to bargaining locally (which also had impacts upon their wages and local spending power). Similar geographical considerations are at play when workers try to develop transnational cross-spatial alliances to bring pressure to bear on globally organized firms – by transforming their own geographical scale of organization through participating in international campaigns and organizations, workers can play active roles in shaping global flows of investment and the movement of jobs, for instance.

#### *Greek Workers Shape the Economic Geography of the Crisis*

Having outlined above some of the ways in which workers' actions are shaped by and shape the production of the geography of capitalism, in this section I want to return to the situation in Greece to show how the new economic landscapes being produced during the crisis are being moulded, at least in part, by the activities of workers. I do so by drawing upon two case studies, the details of which are reported on more fully elsewhere (see Gialis and Herod 2013 and Gialis and Herod 2014). Certainly, these are just two examples of workers playing a role in shaping the economic geography of the crisis and there are myriad others from which to choose. The point in highlighting them, though, is that they provide important empirical insights into how to better theorize the forces shaping how Greece's new economic landscapes are being produced.

#### *Case Study 1: Greek Powerworkers Challenge the State's Power to Shape Capital Flows and so the Geography of Austerity*

In this first case study I explore a series of actions conducted by the Greek powerworkers' union GENOP-DEI, which supported widespread popular protests against a property tax introduced in 2011 to raise an estimated €2 to €3 billion in revenues as part of the *quid pro quo* for continued loans from the Troika. The powerworkers' actions stem from the government's decision to use the Public Power Corporation (Δημόσια Επιχείρηση Ηλεκτρισμού/Dimosia Epicheirisi Ilektrismou [DEI]) as, essentially, a collection agency for the tax. The government chose to do so because, at the time, DEI was the country's sole electricity retailer and so most Greeks were customers. The tax, however, was deeply unpopular with many members of the public. Indeed, it was quickly dubbed the "haratsi," a reference to unpopular taxes levied during the days when Greece was part of the Ottoman Empire. Crucially, the government indicated that DEI customers who did not pay the tax would have their electricity cut off.

The public's response to the government's policy was quick and widespread. Hundreds of thousands of Greeks simply refused to pay the tax (even at the risk of having their electricity cut off) as what started out as localized resistance in Athens and Thessaloniki soon spread across the country. Many people padlocked their electricity meters so that DEI staff would be hard-pressed to know exactly how much electricity they had used whereas other groups published pamphlets advising how to avoid paying the tax. In some municipalities the local government even provided information to residents concerning how to avoid the tax and/or supported efforts to evade it. In other places groups of electricians and others actually helped residents reconnect their power source in cases where buildings had been cut off for non-payment.

A key organization in the struggle against the new tax, however, was the powerworkers' union GENOP-DEI. The union had been supportive of efforts to oppose the tax since it had been first implemented. For instance, in an important show of solidarity, union leaders ordered their members not to cut off the power to buildings whose owners had not paid the tax. This forced DEI to subcontract the job of cutting off power to private contractors. However, at GENOP's urging,

activists then occupied the building of one of the sub-contractors (Geroh Ltd.), forcing the latter to suspend some disconnections. The union, however, was not opposed to cutting off at least one building. Thus, on November 16, 2011, arguing that the government should not be exempt from its own policies, union members cut the electricity to the Health Ministry building because the Ministry had not paid its tax and owed some €3.8 million to DEI. Soon thereafter union members staged a sit-in at the administration building of the DEI unit responsible for cutting off people's electricity. This took place a few days before the visit to Athens of German Chancellor Angela Merkel, who was widely seen as one of the key architects of the austerity measures being forced upon Greece under pressure from the Troika.

In evaluating the actions of the powerworkers, it is important to recognize that they developed both "in-place" and "trans-spatial strategies." With regard to the former, they drew upon local support in cities such as Athens to encourage those who occupied buildings and/or who refused to cut off the electricity to various buildings. Likewise, in many other municipalities they were able to conduct local operations against the central government's wishes and also went so far as to urge the creation of "defence pickets" in working-class neighborhoods to resist disconnections. Union leaders were also successful, though, in generalizing across space opposition to the tax by using their organizational structure to link protestors in different cities, towns, and regions. Although such actions revealed geographical tensions within the union, as many unionists in peripheral cities and regions felt that the tax was inevitable and so that the best thing to do was not to try to oppose it outright but, rather, to make sure that society's most vulnerable (the poor, the elderly, the sick, etc.) were protected from its worst excesses, such trans-spatial coordination was helpful in the union's articulation of a series of rolling strikes across the country that began in late 2012. As a result of all of these actions, the government finally relented and allowed households to claim temporary relief from having to pay the tax, such that by the end of 2012 500,000 property owners had not paid it. Simultaneously, by early 2013 only about 20% of the disconnection orders issued by DEI were actually being enforced.

The struggle between DEI and the powerworkers' union, however, did not end here. In 2014 the union's members engaged in a series of strikes which led to rolling blackouts to protest a government proposal, at the behest of the Troika, to sell off part of the DEI (in which it held a 51% share) to private investors in exchange for a €1 billion loan. Such plans to privatize Greece's energy sector had been in the works for a while and the privatization of the Independent Power Transmission Operator (ADMIE), itself a subsidiary of DEI, had begun in 2013. However, despite government threats of legal action against the strikers, the efforts of the powerworkers and others were eventually sufficient to lead Energy Minister Panagiotis Lafazanis to declare in February 2015 that the new SYRIZA government would not engage in such privatizations (Fintikakis 2015). Although opposition from the powerworkers and others had managed to halt discussion of privatization in early 2015, by July 2015, though, talk of privatizing ADMIE was back on the table as a central element in a three-year agreement between the government and the Troika, one in which Greece would receive an additional €86 billion bailout in exchange for implementing further reforms. Finally, at the end of 2015, the government proposed to spin off ADMIE to form a new entity that would be fully controlled by the Greek state, which would initially sell 20% of the company to a strategic private investor and then, later on, an additional 29% stake. Despite such efforts to "modernize" (at least in the eyes of the Troika) the Greek electricity sector, however, as of late November 2015 it was estimated that some 2.1 million customers still owed money to DEI (Anon 2015).

The story of the powerworkers, then, shows at least two things. The first of these is that the union had to think geographically in terms of its strategy for dealing with the evolving crisis. Thus, it developed place-specific actions (such as occupying the administration building of the DEI unit responsible for cutting off people's electricity and cutting off the electricity to the Health Ministry building) but it also established trans-spatial linkages, for example by making connections between groups in different municipalities and regions who were opposed to the government's efforts to collect the new property tax via people's electricity bills. Second, though, and perhaps more significant for the argument here, the actions of the union and its members

shaped the process whereby the government's austerity policies were implemented and thus who bore the brunt of them. This has affected how the new economic landscape is unfolding during the crisis. For instance, by refusing to cut off people's electricity for failing to pay their bills, the union's members shaped the geography of wealth and tax transfers across the country – people who would otherwise have to pay their bills or risk losing access to power were able to avoid doing so, which has shaped the movement of money across the landscape, keeping it in local communities rather than sending it to Athens in the form of tax payments and then, ultimately, out of the country in the form of loan repayments. Equally, this has meant that millions of Greeks have more money to spend on goods and services in their local communities than they otherwise would have, which has helped stimulate those local economies. At the same time, the activities of the union and its members have shaped the process of the privatization of the power grid, which has also impacted how the new economic geography of Greece is unfolding during the crisis. Without such actions on the part of the union and its supporters in the government, the process of privatization would likely have been conducted in quite different ways and more aggressively than it has been to date, and this would have dramatically influenced the geography of, amongst other things, access to electricity, the flow of capital investments across the landscape (there has been less foreign capital swooping in to Greece to purchase such assets than would likely otherwise have been the case, which has had implications for Greece's neo-colonial relationship with creditor states like Germany and France), and the location of where decisions about the electricity system are made (in local municipalities versus in the offices of various government officials and/or private investment firms in Athens and/or overseas).

#### *Case Study 2: The Immigrant Strawberry Pickers of Nea Manolada Resist Precarity*

A hallmark of the economic situation in Greece in the lead-up to the crisis and since it emerged has been the desire by many European Union (EU) economic planners to make Greek labor markets more "flexible" by removing various structural impediments to labor reallocation – impediments that have been referred to by some as representing a condition of "Eurosclerosis."

One element of this has been efforts to introduce so-called "flexicurity" (in which labor markets are supposedly made more flexible but without reductions in social protections) and to encourage more precarious work arrangements (like part-time and temporary work) as a way, supposedly, to stimulate the southern European economies (Zartaloudis 2014). Such efforts have the potential to affect Greece more than many other EU countries because Greece has one of the Union's most inflexible labor markets (Kwiatkiewicz 2011). Such labor market restructuring, then, has the potential to dramatically transform the economic geography of this part of the world. Moreover, it is frequently assumed that such new models of employment relations are being forced upon workers by capital and the state and that, consequently, the landscape of employment types is a creation of these two sets of social actors. In this brief case study, however, I focus upon one group of extremely vulnerable workers – the strawberry pickers of Nea Manolada – to show that, in fact, even some of the most precarious workers can play important roles in shaping how the new employment relations of the early 21<sup>st</sup> century are playing out in Greece (and, by implication, elsewhere too).

Nea Manolada, in southwestern Greece, produces about 90% of the country's strawberries. Production is dominated by a small group of farmers who work together in a cooperative arrangement. The industry produces about 30,000 tonnes of strawberries annually and the industry has grown dramatically in recent years – Greece jumped from being the world's 36th-largest producer in 2008 to its 24th-largest producer by 2011. Significantly, the industry is reliant upon migrant labor, much of which is of immigrant origin, especially Bulgarian Roma, Bangladeshis, and Pakistanis. This labor force is highly casualized and lives under poor conditions, often sleeping in the fields in rough shacks made from plastic and scavenged metal with neither electricity nor water.

Given the questionable immigration status of some of the workers, there has been great fear amongst many that, if they were to protest their conditions, they would lose their jobs and be subject to deportation. Despite this, on April 18, 2008 hundreds of workers gathered in the town's central square to protest against their poor working conditions and a several months' delay in payment of their wages (by some estimates this amounted

to anywhere between about €130,000 and €200,000). In addition, they argued that they deserved higher wages, both because their industry was quite profitable and because their wages were so low – most earned only €23.50 for a 12-hour day, significantly below the €30 national minimum wage for “unskilled” work. However, after a three-day strike they were attacked by “security guards” hired by many of the farmers who, fearing losing significant amounts of money if the fruit were left on the plants in the fields, hoped to intimidate the strikers back to work. Significantly, although many local people –many of whom were either related to the farmers or did not like the immigrant workers because they felt that they had changed the “Greekness” of the local community– remained silent, the attacks led those in many other parts of Greece to offer the strikers support. Backers from across the country began to show up in Nea Manolada whilst the strawberry pickers received offers of help from various national Greek political parties and unions. Given the fact that many of the pickers were from the Indian subcontinent, they also received support from several international unions, such as the Centre of Indian Trade Unions, one of the biggest workers’ organizations in India.

In understanding the geographical dynamics of their dispute it is important to recognize that the strawberry workers were able to transform the geographical dynamics of their struggle by “upscaling” it. What is meant by this is that they managed to develop linkages across the economic landscape to workers and supporters in other places, thereby transforming the dispute from a local one to a trans-local one that allowed them to draw upon resources outside the community and even outside the country. As mentioned, they received messages of support from organizations as far away as India, as well as from Greek organizations like the All Workers Militant Front [Πανεργατικό Αγωνιστικό Μέτωπο/ Panergatiko Agonistiko Metopo – PAME] and various unionists and activists from other nearby municipalities (e.g., Patras and Pyrgos) and from across Greece. Many supporters in other towns also sent them food and money to help sustain them. The strawberry workers were also supported by demonstrations that took place in front of the Greek Ministry of Employment and the Ministry of Internal Affairs in Athens. As a result of such actions, after a few days the farmers agreed to negotiate with the im-

migrant workers. The settlement they reached provided a 20% increase in wages and a promise of improved living conditions. Despite such success, though, the strawberry pickers’ struggles continued and attitudes on both sides hardened, to the point where, in April 2013, representatives of the farmers shot 28 or so out of some 200 workers who had gathered to again demand back wages. In turn, this led many from outside the community to support the workers to an even greater extent, and a social media campaign was launched to boycott the Nea Manolada “blood strawberries.” Extra-local support also came in the form of action from the Council of Europe (the main European human rights watchdog), which issued a report detailing abuse against migrants in Greece. Such support from other parts of Greece and beyond became even more vociferous when local courts released the shooters with, essentially, a slap on the wrist. Adding insult to injury, the Greek court then ordered the strikers to pay court costs of some €12,000 (about €360 each).

In response to this turn of events, in January 2016 some 42 migrant workers filed suit with the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR), charging that Greece had failed to enforce Article 4 of the European Convention on Human Rights, which prohibits slavery and forced labor. Regardless of the ultimate outcome of the case, it is important for at least two reasons. First, it represents a significant element in the “upscaling” of the strawberry pickers’ conflict with their employers, as they have now managed to bring the force of an EU-wide entity to bear on their local conditions. The situation in Nea Manolada, in other words, has been Europeanized. Second, as a result of the negative publicity brought by filing suit with the ECHR, the Greek government will likely have to engage in a degree of legislative intervention to curb such labor abuses, which should benefit many thousands of immigrant workers who work not only picking strawberries but doing many other types of work. The case shows, then, that even workers who, on the surface, appear relatively powerless (low-paid, immigrant agricultural laborers) can have an influence on how the new economic geography of crisis-prone Greece is being made as, through their actions, they are not only reshaping work relations in the strawberry fields of Nea Manolada but also, potentially, across all of Greece.

### Conclusion

In this paper I have sought to do two things. The first of these is to bring to a Greek audience some of the debates and developments around the topic of Labor Geography as the latter has developed in the Anglophonic world. In particular, this field has tried to explore how workers' geographical situations can shape the possibilities of their economic and political activities and how, in turn, these activities can shape how the economic landscapes of capitalism are made. For instance, much work in the field of Anglophonic Labor Geography has sought to show how diverse sets of social actors are differentially tied into local, regional, national, and transnational spatial relationships and that how they are connected (or not) across space shapes their political-economic behavior. Thus, both capital and labor must negotiate the tensions between their needs for spatial fixity and for geographical mobility and this drives much of their economic praxis – capital must constantly look for new places of profitability even as it must be fixed in place so as to facilitate accumulation, whereas labor must determine whether migrating to new locations is worth abandoning current places of work and residence. Equally, Labor Geographers have explored how different sets of social actors often have quite different spatial visions concerning how they wish to see the geography of capitalism made and these varying spatial imaginations can result in significant political conflicts, between capital and labor but also between different segments of each of these groupings. The fact that these different groups struggle to shape the economic geography of capitalism in often quite different ways means that we must think of that geography as a deeply contested social product. Given, too, that landscapes are not merely a reflection of social relations but are also constitutive of them, analyzing workers' political and economic practice requires an approach grounded in historico-geographical materialism. Such an approach recognizes that worker agency is spatially contextual and is shaped by, amongst other things, the different ways in which capital is embedded in the landscape (is capital relatively fixed in place or is it more spatially mobile?), how successful workers are at developing trans-local solidarities and networks of support (i.e., at building new geographical scales of operating), and the timing of struggles in relation to

trends in the sector and the economy in general (in the case of the strawberry workers, for instance, the fact that they struck during harvest time rather than at some other time of the year meant that they had greater negotiating power because for every day that their dispute went on the farmers risked losing a significant portion of their crop).

Second, drawing upon the theoretical framework of Labor Geography, the two case studies outlined above show that, as we contemplate how the new economic geographies of Greece and the rest of Southern Europe are being made, it is important to understand that workers are playing a role in this too. In other words, workers are not merely flotsam and jetsam cast adrift on the oceans of economic restructuring which are being driven by the deep currents of capital flows. Rather, they are active agents in making the new economic geographies of the crisis, even if this is often in ways that they would not prefer. For sure, in some places workers have less power and in some places they have more. However, the fact that even the precarious immigrant strawberry workers of Nea Manolada have been able to stand up to powerful agricultural interests and to involve the European Court of Human Rights in their struggle, an involvement which may have much broader implications for the wider Greek economy, is indicative of how even workers who seem relatively powerless can be significant shapers of Greece's new economic landscapes. Remembering this fact is important because it shows us that, through struggle, the landscapes proffered by capital and the state are not necessarily those which will end up being put in place. Instead, it reminds us that it is possible to produce more emancipatory landscapes, ones which enable workers to live fuller, more rewarding lives.

### References

Andrzejewski, A.V. (2008). *Building Power: Architecture and Surveillance in Victorian America*. Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press.

Anon (2015). «ΔΕΗ: Θα κόβει το ρεύμα σε όσους δεν είναι στο κοινωνικό τιμολόγιο!» Published in Newsit.gr ([www.newsit.gr/oikonomia/DEI-THa-kovei-to-reyma-se-osoys-den-einai-sto-koinoniko-timologio/442692](http://www.newsit.gr/oikonomia/DEI-THa-kovei-to-reyma-se-osoys-den-einai-sto-koinoniko-timologio/442692)), November 4.

Biggs, L. (1995). "The engineered factory." *Technology and Culture* 36, no. 2, Supplement: S174-S188.

Burkholder, M.A., and Johnson, L.L. (2003) *Colonial Latin America*, 5th edn. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Coe, N., and Jordhus-Lier, D. (2011). "Constrained agency? Re-evaluating the geographies of labour." *Progress in Human Geography* 35.2: 211-233.

Elliot, L. (2012). "Three myths that sustain the economic crisis." Available at [www.theguardian.com/business/economics-blog/2012/aug/05/economic-crisis-myths-sustain](http://www.theguardian.com/business/economics-blog/2012/aug/05/economic-crisis-myths-sustain).

Fintikakis, G. (2015). «Λαφαζάνης: 'Καμία ιδιωτικοποίηση στην ενέργεια και ας λέει το email». Published in Ta Nea.gr ([www.tanea.gr/news/economy/article/5212883/lafazanhs-kamia-idiwtikopoihsh-sthn-energeia-kai-as-leei-to-email](http://www.tanea.gr/news/economy/article/5212883/lafazanhs-kamia-idiwtikopoihsh-sthn-energeia-kai-as-leei-to-email)), February 25.

Foucault, M. (1975 [1977]). *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*. Pantheon Books: New York.

Foucault, M. (1980). "Questions on Geography," in *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings, 1972-1977*, ed. C. Gordon. New York: Pantheon Books, 173-182.

Foucault, M. (1984). "Space, knowledge, and power," in *The Foucault Reader: An Introduction to Foucault's Thought*, ed. P. London: Rabinow. Harmondsworth Press, pp. 239-256.

Gialis, S., and Herod, A. (2013). "Resisting austerity: The case of Greece's powerworkers and steelworkers." *Human Geography* 6.2: 98-115.

Gialis, S., and Herod, A. (2014). "Of steel and strawberries: Greek workers struggle against informal and flexible working arrangements during the crisis." *Geoforum* 57: 138-149.

Harvey, D. (1973). *Social Justice and the City*. London: Edward Arnold.

Harvey, D. (1976). "Labor, capital, and class struggle around the built environment in advanced capitalist societies." *Politics and Society* 6.3: 265-295.

Harvey, D. (1978). "The urban process under capitalism: A framework for analysis." *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* 2.1: 101-131.

Harvey, D. (1982). *The Limits to Capital*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell.

Herod, A. (1997). "Labor's spatial praxis and the geography of contract bargaining in the US east coast longshore industry, 1953-89." *Political Geography* 16.2: 145-169.

Herod, A. (2001). *Labor Geographies: Workers and the Landscapes of Capitalism*. New York: Guilford Press.

Kwiatkiewicz, A. (2011). *Joint Study of the European Social Partners – "The Implementation of Flexicurity and the Role of the Social Partners," National Fiche: Greece*. Report prepared for the "Project of the European Social Partners," with the financial support of the European Commission. Available at [www.erc-online.eu/wp-content/uploads/2014/04/2011-00554-E.pdf](http://www.erc-online.eu/wp-content/uploads/2014/04/2011-00554-E.pdf)

Lefebvre, H. (1974 [1991]). *The Production of Space*. Oxford: Blackwell.

Lefebvre, H. (1973 [1976]). *The Survival of Capitalism: Reproduction of the Relations of Production*. London: St. Martin's Press.

Lier, D. (2007). "Places of work, scales of organising: A review of Labour Geography." *Geography Compass* 1.4: 814-833.

Martinuzzi, E., and Penty, C. (2012). "Goldman turns down Southern Europe banks as crisis lingers." Available at [www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2012-11-26/goldman-sachs-turns-down-southern-europe-banks-as-crisis-lingers](http://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2012-11-26/goldman-sachs-turns-down-southern-europe-banks-as-crisis-lingers).

Marx, K. (1852 [1963]). *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*. International Publishers: New York (originally published in German in 1852; 2004 printing).

Massey, D. (1973). "Towards a critique of industrial location theory." *Antipode* 5.3: 33-39.

Massey, D. (1984). *Spatial Divisions of Labour: Social Structures and the Geography of Production*. London: Macmillan.

Mavroudeas, S. D. (2015). "The Greek saga: Competing explanations of the Greek crisis." Economics Discussion Paper Series 2015-1, University of Kingston, London.

Naddaf, G. (2005). *The Greek Concept of Nature*. Albany NY: SUNY Press.

Rutherford, T. (2010). "De/re-centering work and class? A review and critique of Labour Geography." *Geography Compass* 4.7: 768-777.

Shaikh, A. (2011). "The first great depression of the 21<sup>st</sup> century," in *Socialist Register 2011: The Crisis This Time*, eds. L. Panitch, G. Albo, and V. Chibber. Monthly Review Press: New York, pp. 44-63.

Smith, N. (1984 [1990]). *Uneven Development: Nature, Capital and the Production of Space*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell.

Smith, N. (1986). "On the necessity of uneven development." *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* 10.1: 87-104.

Soja, E. (1980). "The socio-spatial dialectic." *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 70.2: 207-225.

van Meel, J. (2000). *The European Office: Office Design and National Context*. Rotterdam: 010 Publishers.

Weil, J. (2012). "The EU smiled while Spain's banks cooked the books." Available at [www.bloombergview.com/articles/2012-06-14/the-eu-smiled-while-spain-s-banks-cooked-the-books](http://www.bloombergview.com/articles/2012-06-14/the-eu-smiled-while-spain-s-banks-cooked-the-books).

Zartaloudis, S. (2014). *The Impact of European Employment Strategy in Greece and Portugal: Europeanization in a World of Neglect*. Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan.