Commodification and ‘the commons’: The politics of privatising public water in Greece and Portugal during the Eurozone crisis

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Abstract
In response to the Eurozone crisis, austerity and restructuring has been imposed on the European Union’s peripheral member states in order to receive financial bailout loans. In addition to cuts in funding for essential public services, cuts in public sector employment and the further liberalisation of labour markets, this has also included pressure towards the privatisation of state assets. Yet, workers have not simply accepted these restructuring pressures; rather, they have organised and fought back against austerity and enforced privatisation. Based on a historical-materialist perspective and following a strategy of incorporated comparison, in this article, we will comparatively assess the struggles against enforced water privatisation in Greece and Portugal set against the background of the structuring conditions surrounding the Eurozone crisis.

Keywords
Eurozone crisis, Greece, Portugal, privatisation, resistance, water struggles

Introduction
In response to the Eurozone crisis, austerity and restructuring was imposed on the European Union’s (EU’s) peripheral member states in order to receive financial bailout
loans. In addition to spending cuts for public services, cuts in public sector employment and the undermining of industrial relations and trade union rights through enforced cuts in minimum wages and a liberalisation of labour markets, these agreements have also included pressure to privatise a range of state-owned enterprises (SOEs) (Bieler and Jordan, 2015). In short, the burden of adjustment for ‘exiting’ the Eurozone crisis has disproportionately fallen upon the shoulders of workers. However, despite the ever-present social and economic crises that have plagued the political economies of Europe’s periphery, workers have continued to resist the conditions of the memorandums of understanding (MoUs). This article will comparatively analyse struggles surrounding the push to privatise public water and sanitation services in Greece and Portugal, a particular instance of the conditionality included within the multiple MoUs. In order to highlight the deeply politicised nature underpinning imposed restructuring, our comparative analysis of these struggles is incorporated within a broader understanding of struggles over the prospective expansion and deepening of capitalist discipline and domination across Greece’s and Portugal’s political economies.

In the next section, we develop a historical-materialist conceptual framework, through which the struggles over the possible privatisation of water and sanitation can be analysed within the broader economic-political developments. Then, the article moves to analyse the structured agency of capital in pushing for privatisation in Greece and Portugal. In the third section, the article turns to analyse resistance, highlighting how labour has not only put forward an adamant ‘no’ to the prospect of privatisation, but also explored the possibility of providing this essential public service based upon principles of ‘the commons’.

**Politicising privatisation: A historical-materialist framework**

Since 2010, public debate has focused on the technocratic credentials of the conditionality of privatisation in assisting the likes of Greece and Portugal to ‘exit’ the Eurozone crisis (Brauninger, 2013, 2015; *The Guardian*, 2012, 2015a). More critical elements of this debate point to the fact that the prospective sale proceeds from, and the savings to government finances following, privatisation are generally far too minimal to have any real effect on the trajectory of public debt and deficit reduction (Jubilee Debt Campaign, 2016). However, this is where even critical analysis tends to end, remaining on the terrain of debating the virtues or sins of privatisation as a technocratic pursuit of a particular public policy outcome (Vila and Peters, 2016: 11–14). This debate leads to a systemically depoliticised account of the policy response to the Eurozone crisis. A number of academics, including colleagues from the Public Services International Research Unit (PSIRU) at Greenwich University, have already successfully demonstrated that it is economic interests by large transnational corporations (TNCs) at the expense of public sector workers that underlie technocratic discussions about how to manage water (e.g. Goldman, 2007; Hall and Lobina, 2012a; Lobina, 2014; Swyngedouw, 2005). In this article, we will focus on developing a conceptual framework that is able to contribute further to the analysis of the deeply politicised nature of struggles around MoU conditionality and the privatisation of water and sanitation services in Greece and Portugal.
Social movements, and civil society more generally, have been widely studied from liberal approaches, especially in relation to globalisation and the related increase in inequality. Nevertheless, there are a number of problems involved in these analyses. First, civil society is automatically understood as a progressive force against exploitation, potentially able to re-establish control over market forces at the global level (e.g. Held and McGrew, 2002: 135–136; Held et al., 1999: 449–452). Karl Polanyi (1957), and his notion of a double movement, in which a period of laissez-faire is followed by a period of regulation, is often invoked in these studies. These analyses, however, overlook that civil society also includes pro-globalisation forces such as business associations, which are often a driving force behind global restructuring. As a result, automatically assuming civil society as an agent of progressive resistance ‘may actually divert our attention from the very power relations that we would seek to explore and question’ (Amoore and Langley, 2004: 99). Hence, in this article, civil society is understood in a Gramscian sense, representing a terrain of struggle between different social class forces over the dominant economic and political order (Buttigieg, 2005: 38). Second, liberal analyses overlook the crucial importance of the capitalist social relations of production around the private ownership of the means of production and wage labour. As a result, different organisations have different levels of structural power available, for example, with business organisations at a time of transnational production networks being more powerful than national trade unions (Bieler, 2011: 165–170). In other words, civil society is not a level playing field. It ‘is not some kind of benign or neutral zone where different elements of society operate and compete freely and on equal terms, regardless of who holds a predominance of power in government’ (Buttigieg, 1995: 27). Furthermore, by neglecting the social relations of production, liberal approaches overlook in their emphasis on the redistribution of wealth that it is the hidden abode of production where exploitation takes place (Barker, 2013: 44). Emanuele Lobina et al., in their focus on outcomes of water struggles, utilise a policy networks approach in order to go beyond the dichotomy of agency and structure: ‘In fact, networks do not exist in a vacuum and both their origin and evolution are a result of the interdependence between agency and structure’ (Lobina et al., 2011: 20). Elsewhere, Lobina develops a sophisticated approach around agency and institutional governance structures for the analysis of water struggles, which ‘promises to be more exhaustive than one based on agency as its sole interpretive key’ (Lobina, 2012: 170). Nevertheless, he also overlooks the sphere of production underpinning institutional governance structures, where exploitation takes place and different levels of structural power are generated.

In order to adequately politicise our analysis of the MoU conditionality to privatise water and sanitation in Greece and Portugal, we develop a historical-materialist conceptual framework. This will allow us to capture different levels of structural power available to social class forces and provide us with the means of understanding these processes as part of wider struggles over neoliberal forms of capitalist restructuring. Importantly, in addition to intensifying the exploitation of living labour power at sites of production, the prospect of privatising these public services will expand capitalist discipline by enclosing wider elements of the social and natural substratum, deepening the exploitation of ‘social reproduction in its entirety’ (Van der Pijl, 1998: 36). Karl Marx, cited in Van der Pijl, 1998: 36) conceptualised this as ‘real subordination’ as even away from the
site of economic production, labour is subjected to commodification in areas that are vital to social reproduction. Conceptually, this article places the social relations of production as the starting point of analysis and a focus on class struggle as the main explanatory device. In line with Harry Cleaver’s position, the analysis to follow will emphasise the role of (class) agency in the struggle for and against the privatisation of public water and sanitation services: ‘The “laws of motion” of capitalist society are the direct product of class struggle and denote only what capital has had the strength to impose, given the rising power of the working class’ (Cleaver, 2000: 88).

While we agree with such an importance being attached to agency and thus open-ended class struggle, this does not imply that the structural setting of class agency should not be examined. As Marx (1984 [1852]: 10) himself stated: ‘Men [sic] make their own history, but they do not make it as they please; they do not make it under circumstances chosen by themselves, but under circumstances directly encountered, given and transmitted from the past’. Of course, there is a tendential link between the objective class position of social forces and the particular strategies they adopt, but this is determining only in the first instance (Hall, 1996: 44). In other words, within each given structural setting, agents are not completely free in their actions, but they nonetheless still have a range of strategies at their disposal from which they can choose how to go forward (Bieler and Morton, forthcoming: ch. 2). Hence, workers always have possibilities to resist capitalist restructuring, as presented in the case of water and sanitation privatisation in Greece and Portugal.

Historical-materialist analyses are often accused of overlooking the importance of other dimensions, such as gender and ethnicity, when focusing on class struggle. Indeed, because of a focus on class and workers defined narrowly, analysis too often limits itself to trade unions, understood as the institutional expression of the working class (Barker, 2013: 52). Harry Cleaver allows us to address this problem. When reflecting on the increasing number of struggles of the late 1960s and 1970s, Cleaver (2000: 70) asserts that ‘the reproduction of the working class involves not only work in the factory but also work in the home and in the community of homes … the working class had to be redefined to include nonfactory analysis’. Analysing what he called the ‘social factory’ allowed Cleaver to take into account all the other forms of unwaged activities, including child-rearing and education, that are necessary for the reproduction of capital but take place outside the workplace. The struggles over water privatisation are precisely an issue that is of importance across the whole social factory. Privatising water — transforming water into a commodity to make profit — clearly affects the workplace and generally results in lower wages and deteriorating working conditions for workers employed in the sector: ‘Public sector workers tend to have higher protection through collective bargaining coverage and are less affected by precarious work’ (Jakob and Sanchez, 2015: 76). At the same time, however, it also goes beyond concerns related directly to the workplace and affects every worker, as well as the wider community, in their lives outside work, considering how crucial access to safe drinking water and sanitation is in daily life. Thus, the struggle against the commodification of water as a tradable, economic good is an instance of class struggle against the commodification of the sphere of social reproduction. Understanding this struggle consequently involves an assessment of trade unions as well as social movements.
Our comparative analysis of Greece and Portugal does not follow a line of ‘methodological nationalism’, which understands the sociological effect of national-level developments as sealed off from each other and the wider structural setting (Gore, 1996: 80–82) or ‘that would examine particular social movements according to standard criteria of process, goals, and outcomes’ (McMichael, 2010: 5). Instead, we pursue a strategy of an ‘incorporated comparison’, which ensures that ‘comparison becomes an “internal” rather than an “external” (formal) feature of inquiry’ (McMichael, 1990: 389). This approach relates particular manifestations of structured social struggle as ‘components of a broader, world-historical process or conjuncture’ (McMichael, 1990: 389; 2000: 671). Following the methodological strategy of an incorporated comparison, we will demonstrate how the proposed sale of public water and sanitation services is not simply a set of nationally tailored policies linked to bailout conditionality. This specific policy response to the Eurozone crisis is most importantly a spatial and temporal component of a neoliberal regime of privatisation that is deepening the commodification of social reproduction as transnational capital, in particular, seeks new opportunities for investment and profit-making in Greece and Portugal. Concomitantly, incorporating the comparison of resistance to privatisation demonstrates that while struggles in Greece and Portugal have their own particular ‘meaning, form, and dynamics’, both resist the same ‘exclusionary force of multi-faceted forms of neo-liberal development’ that are being proposed (McMichael, 2010: 5). In short, while we are comparing specific struggles over national trajectories of development, we are at all times embedding and internally relating these within the wider struggles contesting the possible privatisation of essential public services as part of the ‘historically integrated process’ of global capitalist restructuring (Morton, 2013: 245).

Methodologically, the empirical argument is partly based on a set of 30 semi-structured interviews with Greek and Portuguese water activists. All interviewees were guaranteed anonymity. Hence, in Appendix 1, they are listed by function but not by name. Interviews have the advantage of providing an insight into the internal decision-making process of an organisation, in contrast to policy documents, which only state the outcome of a debate. The validity of information was cross-checked through the information from other interviews as well as the consultation of further primary and secondary printed sources.

Structure and agency in the push for privatising Greek and Portuguese water and sanitation services

Privatisation and the structuring conditions in the global political economy

Due to the way in which the capitalist social relations of production are organised around wage labour and the private ownership of the means of production, capitalism is characterised by a set of key structuring conditions (Bieler, 2014: 116–119). First, both labour and capital have to reproduce themselves through the market. While workers compete with each other to sell their labour power ‘freely’, capitalists are in constant competition with each other over profitability and market share. Hence, capitalism is characterised by a constant drive towards further innovation in order to outcompete one’s competitors.
However, while capitalism is very dynamic, it is also crisis-prone, which is a second structuring condition. The more goods are produced and the more profits are generated, when looking for further profitable investment opportunities, the more difficult it becomes to bring together excess labour and excess capital in a fruitful way, a ‘state of overaccumulation’ in David Harvey’s (1985: 132) understanding. Third, Rosa Luxemburg (2003 [1913]: 323) had already pointed to ‘the inherent contradiction between the unlimited expansive capacity of the productive forces and the limited expansive capacity of social consumption under conditions of capitalist distribution’. Hence, capitalism constantly has to expand outward and incorporate new, non-capitalist space in order to overcome crises. This outward expansion can be geographical in that new areas are integrated or re-integrated along new lines into capitalism, or it can be inward expansion in that de-commodified areas are re-commodified for profit making.

It is in relation to the third structuring condition that the privatisation of public services becomes important. At times when the global economy is in crisis and other investment opportunities have dried up, investing in service provision, ultimately guaranteed by the state, promises sustainable and usually subsidised profits (Fattori, 2013: 378). Since the 1990s, the privatisation of public assets, referred to by Harvey (2003) as ‘accumulation by dispossession’, has created a global infrastructure market providing capital with new profitable investment opportunities, often through so-called public–private partnerships (PPPs). Private infrastructure investment, writes Dexter Whitfield (2010: 91), ‘is referred to as a “new asset class”, which refers to it becoming a profitable source of private investment with a range of competing investment funds providing good returns relative to other types of investment’. As recent reports confirm, international banks and investment institutions have identified water as an excellent, profitable investment opportunity: ‘A disturbing trend in the water sector is accelerating worldwide. The new “water barons” — the Wall Street banks and elitist multibillionaires — are buying up water all over the world at unprecedented pace’ (Yang, 2012). Slogans such as ‘water is the petroleum for the next century’ (Goldman Sachs) or ‘the water market will soon eclipse oil, agriculture, and precious metals’ (Citigroup) drive this new investment fever. As confirmed by Shiney Varghese (2013), ‘in areas ranging from the Ogallala aquifer to the Great Lakes in North America, water has been referred to as liquid gold’. Ultimately, ‘from the perspective of the financial sector, investing in water is expected to be profitable because of growing demand and constant or diminishing supply which will put upward pressure on the price’ (Bayliss, 2014: 301).

The push for privatisation in Greece and Portugal during the Eurozone crisis has taken place against the background of varied economic circumstances following the global financial crisis. Between 2008 and 2015, Greece’s gross domestic product cumulatively fell by 29.6% (OECD, 2017). An article in the Financial Times puts this into astonishing context when it states that ‘the Greek economy had the largest contraction of any advanced economy since 1950’ (Financial Times, 2015). Set alongside this, Portugal’s cumulative loss of 5.3% does not seem like the significant figure that it still is (OECD, 2017). The severity of economic downturn in Greece has created a more explicit push towards, and oversight of, the privatisation of public water and sanitation services. In Portugal, while the push towards privatisation has been sustained (Interview 29), a less direct set of interventions initially cohered. In short, following the approach of an incorporated
comparison, the contexts in Greece and Portugal do exhibit particular ‘meaning, form, and dynamics’ that it is important to be sensitive to when analysing the ‘historically integrated’ Eurozone crisis and the response to it. The case for the privatisation of water follows neoliberal lines of argument: ‘Proponents of privatization assert that private companies will perform better: they will be more efficient, provide more finance, and mobilize higher-quality expertise than their government counterparts’ (Bakker, 2010: 2). For instance, the privatisation of Greek SOEs was proposed to ensure a reduction in ‘subsidies, other transfers or state guarantees’, while also leading to ‘an increase in efficiency of the companies and by extension in the competitiveness of the economy as a whole’ (European Commission, 2011: 33). This argument is combined with a general mistrust of the state, considered to be ‘unable to deliver the infrastructure needs of its people, due to inefficiency and corruption’ (Robbins, 2003: 1074; see also Interview 3).

Yet, private water companies’ service record is poor. The long-term costs for communities are high, including ‘soaring tariffs, cuts on investments, poor service quality, and the failure of private water corporations to contribute investment finance’ (Lobina, 2014: 10). Hence, rather than being about efficiency and universal access to water, this discourse is primarily attempting to delegitimise the role of the state in delivering public services, increasing the pressure for further accumulation through the privatisation of public assets (Swyngedouw, 2005: 87). Interestingly, the Athens Water Supply and Sewerage Company (EYDAP) and the water company of Thessaloniki (EYATH), both earmarked for privatisation, have historically been profitable, including the holding of significant cash surpluses, while also running efficient and high-quality services for consumers (Interview 10). Multinationals Observatory reports that, in 2012, EYDAP posted ‘a net annual profit of €62 million out of a €353 million turnover’ (Multinationals Observatory, 2014). Additionally, it holds €43 million in cash reserves and €881 in equity, and has €1.2 billion owed to the company by a variety of sources, including the Greek government and various agencies and businesses. In the case of EYATH, there is a similar picture. In 2013, the company posted a profit of €18 million from a turnover of €77 million, with €33 million in cash reserves and €135 million in equity (Multinationals Observatory, 2014). This indicates the deeply politicised nature of the proposed capitalist restructuring of privatisation as these Greek public companies already have a strong record of performance in delivering water and sanitation services.

The agency of transnational capital in the privatisation of Greek and Portuguese water and sanitation

Importantly, however, the pressure for water privatisation must not be exclusively understood as resulting from capitalism’s structuring condition of outward expansion. Class agency is closely involved. Powerful economic interests are behind the push for privatisation. Globally, it was a network around the World Bank that had pushed for water privatisation, especially in the Global South during the 1990s and early 2000s (Goldman, 2007: 790). Within the EU, on the basis of their structural power, large European TNCs have lobbied strongly for neoliberal restructuring. The European Services Forum (ESF) has been closely involved in advising the Commission on the further liberalisation and privatisation of the public sector: ‘In 2012, the Commission accepted just one meeting with
trade unions on the issue of services trade. In contrast, it met more than 20 times with the ESF’ (Corporate Europe Observatory, 2013: 5). Water management has developed into big business, with powerful TNCs controlling most of the privatised operations. Since the early 20th century, with the exception of France, water companies had mainly been in public hands. Against the background of neoliberalism emerging as the new economic consensus, privatisation became more widespread in the late 1980s and throughout the 1990s: ‘The biggest national change came in the UK in 1989, when the Thatcher government privatised water throughout England and Wales, against strong public opposition, by floating the 10 regional companies on the stock exchange’ (Hall and Lobina, 2012b: 124). The expansion of privatisation during the 1990s, especially in Central and Eastern Europe after the end of the Cold War, in Latin America and in developing countries in Africa, was carried out by this small group of French and British private water companies (Hall and Lobina, 2009: 81), backed up by the conditionality of the International Monetary Fund’s (IMF’s) and World Bank’s structural adjustment programmes.

During the 2000s, the shift towards the privatisation of water services, mentioned earlier, started to stall. The private French and English companies withdrew from their international engagements, in particular, from developing countries. In view of insufficient profitability and related criticism by their shareholders, the companies’ inability to deliver on their promises, and mounting resistance movements, these companies started to look elsewhere for business (Hall and Lobina, 2009: 84–88). The French companies Suez and Veolia:

have instead refocused on engineering work, such as water and wastewater treatment plants and desalination plants, water and sanitation services for industrial companies, and consultancy contracts. Like the companies’ other main business, waste management, these are areas of reliably growing demand. (Hall and Lobina, 2012b: 132)

English private companies, on the other hand, have increasingly focused on profits via financialisation. In this process, investors bought the water companies ‘in large part using debt finance, which was then added to the debts of the company (rather than staying with the investors)’ (Bayliss, 2017: 387). Moreover, in order to provide investment opportunities satisfying the interest in water by international banks and investment institutions mentioned earlier, ‘financial innovation has led to the launch of at least four major water-focused exchange traded funds (ETFs) since 2005’ (Bayliss, 2014: 298). This securitisation of water companies is based on household water bills, which have been repackaged and sold on via offshore jurisdictions, linking water consumers to global financial markets:

Few of the 15 million Thames Water customers, for example, will have any idea that paying their water bill connects them to one of the largest Australian investment banks via a portfolio of European infrastructure funds. They are, however, beholden to these investors. Average household bills have increased by 40 per cent in real terms since privatisation. Over the 2010–15 price review period, nearly 27 per cent of the average customer bill of £360 was paid for ‘return on capital’. (Bayliss, 2017: 388)

These developments do not, however, imply that private companies would no longer be interested in taking over water services, provided that they are in developed countries
with a secure income stream, as the examples of Greece and Portugal in the Eurozone crisis demonstrate.

Unsurprisingly, it has been large European TNCs that have been at the forefront of the bidding process for purchasing state-owned water companies in Greece and Portugal (Multinationals Observatory, 2014; Interview 10). When the tendering process for the state-owned water and sanitation company of Thessaloniki (EYATH) started in early 2013, two consortia were bidding. This included Suez Environment, which was looking to purchase a further 51% of shares in addition to its current 5% of stock, ‘in association with the Greek construction firm EllAktor, controlled by George Bobolas’ (Multinationals Observatory, 2014). As mentioned earlier, the drive towards privatising water and sanitation in Portugal has not been as clear during the crisis. However, it gathered momentum towards the end of the official programme period, arguably due to the worse than expected economic recovery. The 11th and final review of Portugal’s MoU, conducted in the spring of 2014, stated that:

instead of selling the [national holding] company [Aguas de Portugal (AdP)] as a whole it was agreed to first restructure the water and waste branches before selling the waste management holding (EGF) and consider opening up water activities to private capital and management. (European Commission, 2014: 29)

These proposals, like in the case of Greece, have drawn the attention of transnational capital. The sale of Empresa Geral do Fomento (EGF), which supervises the operation of multi-municipal companies serving 60% of the population (Teles, 2015: 36) and is a sub-holding company of AdP, was completed in September 2014. It was awarded to the SUMA consortium, led by Mota-Engil,1 which now holds a 95% stake in the company (Reuters, 2014). Beyond the sale of EGF, the previous Portuguese coalition government claimed that it had no intention of further privatising public water services (Interview 28). Instead, it argued, the planned restructuring of AdP was solely concerned with tariff structures, making them more equitable between coastal and in-land locations (Teles, 2015: 36). As a Deputy of the Portuguese Parliament’s Committee on Economics, Innovation and Public Works from the centre-right Social Democratic Party (PSD) put it: ‘so it is a question of social equality. Of the price of water. Not to privatisation of the system’ (Interview 28). However, this ignores that the main reason EGF was explicitly part of the MoU privatisation programme was because ‘all regional corporations belonging to EGF [were] financially viable’ (Teles, 2015: 37), unlike many of the municipal water companies held by AdP. EGF was therefore already attractive for potential investors.2 In light of this experience, Nuno Teles states that ‘the privatisation of the public holding company seems to be just a matter of time, depending on the reorganisation of municipal bulk water companies held by AdP’ (Teles, 2015: 37; see also Rodrigues and Reis, 2012: 201; Interviews 20 and 22).

A shift towards ‘authoritarian neoliberalism’ in Greek and Portuguese privatisation

Although those who support neoliberal policies advocate a retreat of the state from the market, in reality, governments at national as well as European levels are closely involved
in the processes of privatisation: ‘Without the various state levels paving the way and imposing conditions that guarantee privatization and then secure profitable operation afterwards, this accumulation by dispossession could not possibly take place’ (Swyngedouw, 2005: 89). At the supranational, EU form of state level, water privatisation has been pushed, especially vis-a-vis Greece and Portugal, through the MoUs linked to bailout agreements (EPSU, 2012: 1; Hall and Lobina, 2012a: 28). These processes are, of course, contested (see the next section) and, thus, unsurprisingly, the imposition of restructuring as a result of the crisis has come hand in hand with an increasing move towards ‘authoritarian neoliberalism’. Here, authoritarianism does not refer to an order imposed by non-democratic means and brute force. Rather, it is ‘the reconfiguring of state and institutional power in an attempt to insulate certain policies and institutional practices from social and political dissent’ (Bruff, 2014: 115). This is a reconfiguration that is generally passed by national parliaments within political systems of representative democracy, albeit by narrow majorities. It ‘reinforces and increasingly relies upon 1) coercive state practices that discipline, marginalise and criminalise oppositional social forces and 2) the judicial and administrative state apparatuses which limit the avenues in which neoliberal policies can be challenged’ (Tansel, 2017: 2). When analysing this shift towards authoritarian neoliberalism through an incorporated comparison approach, it is evident that the institutional restructuring undertaken to support processes of privatisation exhibits a strong degree of temporal discontinuity as novel forms of economic governance are implemented across the Eurozone at a supranational level, and internalised within national forms of state.

In Greece, the shift towards practices of authoritarian neoliberalism has been reinforced throughout the three MoUs signed between various governments and the troika (European Commission (EC), European Central Bank (ECB) and IMF). By the fourth review of the first agreement in spring 2011, and under increasing ‘guidance’ from the troika, the privatisation programme aimed at generating a staggering €50 billion worth of revenue. It was expected that there would be an increase in revenues from the initial aim of €3 billion by the end of 2013 to a total of €22 billion, then going on to reaching the €50 billion target by 2015 (European Commission, 2011: 33). Included in the plan was an expected share sale of ‘at least 40 per cent’ of EYATH by the third quarter (Q3) of 2011 and 27.3% of EYDAP by Q2 of 2012. A further round of share sales was expected to be completed by Q4 of 2012 in the case of EYATH and Q4 of 2013 for EYDAP (see European Commission, 2011: 32, Table 14). Eventually, a parliamentary vote in late 2012 authorised the full sale of both companies (Multinationals Observatory, 2014). The first review of the initial MoU outlined expectations that it would be the government itself, primarily the Ministry of Finance, which would be responsible for devising and delivering the detailed privatisation programme (European Commission, 2010: 53–54). However, the fourth review stated that there is a need to set up a ‘fund to accelerate privatisation’ (European Commission, 2011: 30–31). This was justified on the grounds that ‘experience shows that large privatisation plans are more effective when a single entity is in the lead of the whole process and takes full ownership of the assets to be privatised’ (European Commission, 2011: 30). On 1 July 2011, such an entity was created through the implementation of law L.3986/2011. Called the Hellenic Republic Asset Development Fund (HDADF, or otherwise known colloquially as TAIPED), its ‘mission’ is ‘to restrict
governmental intervention in the privatisation process’, with the HDADF’s Board hav-
ing ‘absolute authority on privatisation decisions’, with ‘most of the assets contained in
the medium-term plan [the privatisation programme detailed earlier] hav[ing] been
transferred to the Fund’, including EYDAP and EYATH (original statement of HDADF,
http://www.hradf.com/en/fund; accessed 1 July 2014). As Panagiotis Sotiris (2017: 178)
sums up: ‘each round of evaluation was a hard negotiation with the representatives of the
government usually ending up with offering new concessions to the Troika’.

In Portugal, too, practices of authoritarian neoliberalism can be observed in the
restructuring of public services. Justified on the grounds of unsustainable debt levels,
‘debt brakes’ have been introduced at the municipal level. These have then been enforced
through the conditionality of the MoU in line with the new forms of European Economic
Governance, including the Treaty on Stability, Coordination and Governance, also
referred to as the Fiscal Compact, the so-called ‘six pack’ of EU laws on European
Economic Governance of November 2011 and the ‘two pack’ on the strengthening of
economic and budgetary surveillance of member states of May 2013 (Bieler and Erne,
2014: 159–161). The introduction of this legislation has put further pressure on restruc-
turing or privatising municipal-level services in order to meet the quantitative targets set
out in the MoU. In order to ensure compliance with this budget conditionality, ‘all three
levels of government are subject to annual debt limits’ (Burret and Schnellenbach, 2013:
45). At a municipal level, legislation was introduced to limit the ‘public debt of each
municipality and autonomous region to a maximum of 150 per cent of their average net
current revenues during the preceding three years’ (Burret and Schnellenbach, 2013:
45). If a municipality exceeds these limits, it has to reduce the difference by at least 10%
Importantly, these laws ‘include a no-bailout clause for regional and local jurisdictions’
(Burrett and Schnellenbach, 2013: 45). Hence, the Portuguese central government is not
allowed to assume the liabilities of municipalities, placing a significant burden on local
governments to restructure and, at the same time, disempowering democratically elected
local councillors to a significant extent. In short, these novel forms of technocratic eco-
nomic governance are creating strong pressures to restructure Portugal’s political econ-
omy, including the possibility of privatising public services. However, considering
Portugal’s less severe economic crisis, there was not the same set of explicit measures
outlined in its MoU as there has been in Greece’s previous and ongoing programmes.

Yet, it is important to emphasise that attempts to restructure political economies and
deepen exploitation are always contested. In the next section, we will analyse the strate-
gies of class resistance in Greece and Portugal against these restructuring pressures.

**Greek and Portuguese labour in the struggle against water and sanitation privatisation and for a common(s) alternative**

In both countries, water and sanitation services have been one of the most important
areas of struggle when contesting the austerity-laden policy response to the Eurozone
crisis, alongside other vital areas of social reproduction, including health care, education
and pension reform (Interviews 22 and 26). There has been a clear perception that suffer-
ing defeat in the area of water and sanitation services could create wider ramifications for
activists struggling against austerity and restructuring in other sectors. Even in Portugal,
where there has been a less explicit push for privatisation until later in the bailout pro-
gramme, the water and sanitation sector has been a key battleground in the struggle
against austerity. Portuguese activists have continued to place the issue central to strug-
gles as the sector has undergone significant commercial restructuring, increasing the
attractiveness for private investment in the future (Interview 26). Due to their promi-
nence within the movement against privatisation, the following analysis focuses on the
struggles within large urban centres, such as Athens and Thessaloniki in Greece, and
Lisbon in Portugal.

The agents of resistance against the privatisation of public water and
sanitation

Alongside resisting the restructuring of labour markets and industrial relations, trade
union activists in Greece have also been at the forefront of struggles against water and
sanitation privatisation. Prominent Greek trade unions involved in struggles include the
Water Workers’ Unions of Athens and Thessaloniki (OME-EYDAP/OME-EYATH), and
the Athens/Thessaloniki Federations of Unions (EKA/EKTH, also known as Labour
Centres). However, active participation across trade union confederations has not always
been forthcoming, mainly due to internal political divisions as a result of institutionalised
party affiliations within most Greek public sector unions (Ioannou, 2000; Interviews 4
and 16). Thus, as the government of the day changed, so did the positions of support and
opposition for various policies, including privatisation. With the continuation of clien-
telistic practices in the face of a severe socio-economic crisis, this has perpetuated a
history of suspicious relations with wider society (Afonso et al., 2015; see also Interviews
6 and 7). It is claimed that there is a perception among civil society that prominent union-
ists are simply positioning themselves for appointments within the company, or poten-
tially even a political career (Interviews 2 and 5).

The ongoing suspicion of trade union confederations has meant that many individ-
ual activists of the Athens and Thessaloniki water company unions have developed
novel political practices in an attempt to address the disconnection between their insti-
tutionalised organisation and wider civil society. In this process, their union practice
has become ‘effectively reborn’, including the autonomy of their union activities from
all mainstream political parties (Interviews 4, 9, 10, 16 and 17). This is claimed to be
central to a process of emancipating union activists ‘from the hierarchies, dependen-
cies and pervasive forms of domination associated with a state operating through clien-
telism’ (Wainwright, 2014: 27). Equally important, union activists have shifted their
political practice towards so-called ‘social movement unionism’ (Kretsos, 2011). This
is a form of unionism that attempts to integrate workers, trade unions and the wider
labour movement into broader coalitions for social and economic justice. For members
of OME-EYDAP, this has been through the creation of SEKES (‘participatory unity
movement’), while OME-EYATH has been central to the establishment of a city-based
umbrella social movement organisation, SOS to NERO (‘Save Our Water’). This
approach has been the central factor in (re)building reciprocal relationships of solidar-
ity across civil society (Interviews 4, 9, 10 and 17) and allowed union activists to
demonstrate that they are attuned to the importance of struggling for public water as an
issue of social reproduction, not simply as workers ‘who are afraid of losing our jobs’ (Interview 10). The other prominent activists involved in resisting the privatisation of public water and sanitation have been social movements emerging from the ‘indignados’ squares movement (Sotirakopoulos and Sotiropoulos, 2013). The emergence of a wider politically active civil society in Greece has assisted in breaking the historical dominance of political parties. Prominent activists include the union activists discussed earlier, as well as the likes of Save Greek Water (Athens) and Initiative 136 (K136) (Thessaloniki). The success of developing a united front against the privatisation of public water and sanitation in Thessaloniki meant that, in April 2013, SOS te to NERO was consolidated to act as an overarching social movement organisation that coordinates the activities of all its constituent elements (Interview 10). These included social-economy activists (Interviews 8 and 11), academics (Interview 12), mayors, union members (across different sectors) (Interviews 9 and 10), environmentalist organisations (including the Green Party) (Interview 14) and those who would simply identify themselves as ‘ordinary citizens’.

In Portugal, trade unions have also been at the forefront of resisting water and sanitation privatisation. However, there has not been an equivalent shift in the practices or alliances formed in these struggles due to the greater political coherence in how the trade union movement is institutionalised compared with Greece. Thanks to a unified political position — with the General Confederation of Portuguese Workers (CGTP) leadership being closely aligned to the Communist Party (PCP) (Costa, 2012) — and no networks of clientelism to maintain, Portuguese trade union activists have not been presented with an internally generated dispute concerning the privatisation of water and sanitation. In turn, there has been no perception that novel forms of mobilisation and alliance need to be pursued, such as ‘social movement unionism’, in order to struggle successfully against privatisation. While there has been the creation of an umbrella body, Agua de Todos (‘Water for All’) — drawing together a wide network of groups, including other public sector unions (particularly teachers), unions of municipalities and farmers’ associations (see: http://www.aguadetodos.com/) — there is still a continued focus on the National Union of Workers of Local and Regional Administration, Public Companies, Concessionaries, and Related Companies (STAL), affiliated to the CGTP, leading the struggle as the dominant institutional expression of the labour movement related to this sector (Interview 26). In comparison, the creation of SOS te to NERO in Thessaloniki has led to a much greater horizontal devolution of organisational formation and practices, not privileging the role of OME-EYATH. As a result of the missing internal dispute within the Portuguese trade union movement, a deeper questioning of the historical relationship between trade unions and social movements has not taken place. Instead, an arm’s-length relationship has continued between these two organisational forms, with reciprocal suspicion shaping their interaction (Interviews 21, 24, 27 and 29). Trade union leaders argue that social movements approach struggles over possible forms of restructuring as a ‘100 metre race’, when instead they should be prepared for a ‘marathon’ (Interview 30; see also Interviews 21 and 22). On the other hand, social movement activists argue ‘that union bureaucratic structures have been incorporated within state structures for too long, and therefore are too slow and ineffective to react when required by circumstances’ (Clua-Losada and
Bieler and Jordan

Horn, 2014: 218). This has led to some sections of the broader labour movement ‘more forcefully arguing for a different role for unions, one which is less concerned with bureaucratic state–union relationships and instead is more willing to resist when required’ (Clua-Losada and Horn, 2014: 218; see also Interview 24).

Unsurprisingly, while STAL activists have clearly demonstrated a generalised concern over the ability of labour to socially reproduce itself — beyond simply sectoral concerns over pay and conditions — this has not been aligned with political practices that allow for a widening of the organisational basis of the national water movement. This is not simply isolated to the issue of public water or to STAL as a single federation, but is a more generalised response from the union movement in Portugal. Unlike the situation in Greece, there is greater trust between Portuguese trade unions and political parties, particularly between STAL/CGTP and the Communist Party, with trade union–party relations not having become discredited during the crisis. Nevertheless, the lack of cooperation between trade unions and social movements has had a negative impact on trade unions’ ability to influence policymaking. A former president of CGTP, for example, argued that ‘CGTP should have cared more as a trade union … with building bridges towards other social movements’ (Interview 23). Achieving this, he claimed, would ‘revitalise the social and political within the trade union movement’ (Interview 23). This conclusion is supported by Teles (2015: 36), who points out that such ‘union-centric’ struggles are an important factor in explaining why union impact has been ‘feeble in terms of popular mobilisation and public debate [against water privatisation], concentrating on municipalities that have Communist Party mayors’, that is, reflecting the greater trust between the institutionalised trade union movement (particularly CGTP) and political parties (particularly the PCP). In other words, struggles in Portugal are more defensive in the resistance to water privatisation, focusing on the retention of institutional gains that were made during the Revolutionary period and are now considered to be under systematic attack (Interview 30). What is clear from this comparison is that when analysing struggles surrounding water privatisation, we need to be sensitive to particular meanings, forms and dynamics, as well as the links between political parties and the labour movement. At the same time, we need to appreciate the way in which both cases of resistance are faced with the same exclusionary force of multifaceted forms of neoliberal development. In short, while we are comparing specific moments of struggle over the possible privatisation of public water, we are also relating this dynamic to the historically integrated process of global capitalist restructuring that has, once again, gathered momentum during the Eurozone crisis.

Resisting the privatisation of public water and sanitation

Participants in the struggle against the privatisation of water and sanitation in Greece and Portugal emphasised the importance of this struggle being part of a wider European movement. Thus, both the Greek and Portuguese movements participated in the first European Citizens’ Initiative, ‘Water and Sanitation are a Human Right’. This initiative was coordinated by the European Federation of Public Service Unions (EPSU), together with the European Water Movement (Bieler, 2017; Interviews 10, 14 and 26). As a member of Save Greek Water succinctly outlines:
We have to understand who are the people who push for this? The big multinationals of water at European level, like Suez and the … water lobby in the private sector. And how do they do it, through the Commission, fine. So let’s try to do something about that. (Interview 1)

In other words, there was recognition that in the face of prospective global capitalist restructuring through privatisation, struggles resisting this also had to be transnationalised, attempting to disrupt these efforts through the legislative mechanisms of the EU (Interviews 1, 10, 14 and 26). The minimum quota for the European Citizens’ Initiative was fulfilled in 13 countries, including Greece, but not Portugal, highlighting the more successful, broader mobilisation in the former, discussed earlier, but equally reflecting the more urgent need in Greece to confront water privatisation, which was not on the agenda in Portugal in the same way.

Despite ongoing debates about the possible alternative forms of ownership and management that could be pursued in relation to water and sanitation services (analysed later), Greek activists involved with the umbrella organisation SOS te to NERO have been keen to emphasise that ‘the target is common … even if we shoot from different directions. Let’s surround the target’ (Wainwright, 2014: 25). In other words, the diverse democratising initiatives that are a common thread of interest among SOS te to NERO members should not distract from the dominant aim of ensuring that privatisation is stopped. ‘Surrounding the target’ primarily took the form of countering the EC’s disappointing response to the European Citizens’ Initiative (Bieler, 2017: 313). In February 2013, activists of SOS te to NERO decided to hold a city-wide referendum in Thessaloniki about the proposed privatisation of EYATH (Interview 10). The referendum was held on 18 May 2014, supported by the European Water Movement and EPSU, with both organisations sending 30 monitors between them from European countries, including Italy and Germany (Interview 11). Campaigning on the issue was conducted at local level through the well-established links with neighbourhood councils (Interview 11). The result of the referendum was resounding: 218,002 citizens voted in the referendum across 181 polling stations, with 98% voting against the privatisation of water. This is a clear sign that the novel practices of ‘social movement unionism’ had ensured a broad and effective movement against the prospect of privatisation.

Resisting the privatisation of water in Greece has also been pursued through legal initiatives. In the Attica region of Greece, this was led by Save Greek Water and SEKES (Interview 1), while in Thessaloniki, this was pursued by the workers union of EYATH (Interview 10). Both filed law suits to Greece’s Constitutional Court, the Council of State, demanding that the ownership transfer of both companies from the state to TAIPED be reversed. While the EYATH suit was dismissed on technical grounds, the case of EYDAP was successful. In May 2014, the court ruled that the transfer of ownership to TAIPED, and the proposed privatisation beyond this, violated Articles 5 and 21 of the Greek constitution. These articles outline that the state is responsible for the protection of the citizens’ fundamental right to health. The ruling itself stated that:

the effective transformation of the state company to a private one which operates on a for-profit basis renders uncertain the continuation on its part of accessible services for the common good of a high quality as they will no longer be comprehensively secured by state oversight. (Neos Kosmos, 2014)
The ruling would not have been quite so unanimous had there not been successful campaigns raising awareness of the negative experience of privatisation at both a national and European level (Interviews 1 and 10). In the end, the New Democracy Greek government decided to put a stop to the privatisation of water services in both Thessaloniki and Athens (MacroPolis, 2014). However, highlighting the manner in which practices of authoritarian neoliberalism have insulated institutions from popular dissent and contestation, TAIPED continues to hold ownership of both EYATH and EYDAP to the present day, despite the ruling that both must move back under state control (Interviews 1, 10 and 12).

The Portuguese water movement initiated their own legislative process after the formation of Agua de Todos in 2011. The aim was to enshrine the 2010 United Nations (UN) resolution of ‘water and sanitation are a human right’ in national legislation, with the official procedure being initiated by citizens signing a petition and proposing legislation (Interview 26). A total of 50,000 signatures were collected, and the PCP supported the initiative in Parliament. However, the vote held on the legislation in 2014 was easily defeated in Parliament (Interview 26). This was not solely due to opposition from the PSD-led centre-right coalition government of the day, as a coalition of leftist parties could have commanded a majority in the rounds of voting. Instead, while there was widespread support among left parties — the Socialists (PS), Left Bloc and PCP — for enshrining legislation that reflected water as a human right, the same could not be said for another part of the legislation, which aimed to legally prevent any kind of privatisation in the future. Having been central to water privatisation initiatives in the past, including ‘Aquapor’ (Teles, 2015: 37), PS became divided over this issue ideologically, with only leftist members of the party being in support of ensuring that water services remained public in the future. Overall, this rather general attempt to protect public water services in national legislation reflects a situation in which water was not yet under direct privatisation challenge. Hence, while, in Greece, the Constitutional Court had been appealed to in relation to defend the public nature of the water companies in Athens and Thessaloniki that were to be privatised, in Portugal, the constitutional initiative was an attempt to pre-empt and prevent privatisation in the future. Despite widespread public opposition to the possible privatisation of water, the Portuguese water movement was unable to translate their mobilisation into more effective political pressure through the legislative process. The inability to overcome electoral divisions is further highlighted by the fact that Agua de Todos has only gained prominent support among Communist-controlled municipalities, primarily through relationships with STAL activists. The ‘National Association of Municipalities they don’t join us because they say well if a municipality wants to give the water to a private water company that is a matter of that municipality’ (Interview 26). In short, the broad-based alliance of trade unions and social movements in Greece has been more effective in achieving their aims compared with the water movement in Portugal.

**Struggling for a common(s) alternative to ‘real subordination’**

The prospective privatisation of public water and sanitation services has been resisted by a broad-based coalition of labour. Importantly, resistance by labour has not simply pursued a ‘no’ to privatisation, but also explored the possibility of pursuing development
initiatives linked to social-economy alternatives. Such alternatives highlight how resistive class agency during the crisis has partially gone beyond simply objecting to the technical policy of privatisation, and has begun to question the very presence of capitalist social relations in areas of social reproduction. To an important degree, targeting the systemic characteristics of how such a service is ‘produced’ and distributed has been directly influenced by the Italian water movement, which has argued that water and sanitation services should be considered a ‘commons’ (Bieler, 2015: 47–48). Here, the commons are understood as a shared, collectively managed resource among the human population, ‘the source of shared popular livelihoods and cultural meaning’ (McMichael, 2017: 296). This conceptualisation of water and sanitation has important political implications as those who advocate for the ‘commonification’ of water and sanitation assert that relevant services should be jointly owned, and governed collectively through new forms of participatory/direct democracy (Bakker, 2008: 241–243). The foundational human need for water, and its unique quality in this regard, has been presented as an effective discursive framing tool against the justifications for privatisation put forward by transnational capital. This counter-discourse organised around water and sanitation as a commons has been evoked equally in the Greek and Portuguese water movements as a central principle of resistance against water privatisation (Interviews 9 and 26). However, when looking at prospective alternatives, the idea of the commons offering an alternative configuration of political-economic organisation in the ‘production’ and distribution of water is much more prominent in the Greek movement (Interviews 8, 9, 10 and 11). As a Greek interviewee pointed out, ‘this is a new mentality of changing society and of more participatory democracy which we need absolutely in order to survive’ (Interview 18).

The clearest example has been the development of K136 in Thessaloniki, Greece. K136 originated from the squares movement. As well as being part of the wider water movement in the city (SOS te to NERO), K136 is also part of an umbrella organisation known as PROSKALO, a non-profit civil society organisation. PROSKALO was founded in 2011 with the aim ‘to promote a social solidarity economy through direct democracy’. This was particularly focused on areas that are considered a commons, such as water, food, energy, waste management and education (see PROSKALO, http://www.proskalo.net/p/proskalo-cooperation-initiative-for.html; see also Fattori, 2013; Interviews 8, 13, 15 and 19). Cooperatives provide the preferred formal organisational model to pursue the ‘commonification’ of social goods. The establishment of the Bios Coop, a food and convenience store, in 2012 is the prime example of the organisation’s activities. Specifically in relation to water and sanitation services, the main idea of K136 is that if every household connected to the city’s water service bought a non-transferable share in the state-owned water company of Thessaloniki, the public could own the water and sanitation company through a system of neighbourhood cooperatives coming together through a single overall cooperative (Interview 11). As an activist of K136 states: ‘it would, in effect, be a public–public answer to the troika’s public–private partnership’ (Wainwright, 2014: 25). Explicitly, activists of PROSKALO and K136 see this as a means by which to reject both the statist ‘Soviet’ and the private ‘capitalist’ model of ownership (Interview 8). While this initiative has become internationally recognised, there is a hesitancy within the Greek water movement about the idea, even within the Thessaloniki-based SOS te to NERO, as it is argued that through state taxation and
company bills, citizens have already paid for the company and the sector’s infrastructural development. The question is therefore posed: ‘Why should they have to do so again?’ (Interview 12). Further, there has been a general problem of affordability across the city among citizens due to the implementation of poverty-inducing austerity and tax increases. However, despite this, cooperatives have been formed in eight out of 16 neighbourhoods in Thessaloniki, and the municipality has issued a generally positive response to the initiative.

The preference for municipal or state-led management of public water services in Portugal, by contrast, also reflects the greater participation and success of the PCP in electoral politics, the party’s affiliation with a largely unified trade union movement and the desire to retain their prominent institutional presence within the state apparatus. In short, the links between political party and trade union were clearer than in the Greek case and not tainted by notions of patronage and corruption. This has created a strong degree of historical continuity, dating back to the Carnation Revolution, concerning the gains that can be made for labour.

**Conclusion**

The privatisation of water and sanitation has been a key battleground against neoliberal restructuring in Greece and Portugal. Our historical-materialist approach has been important for our analysis of class struggles around the prospective ‘real subordination’ of labour in Greece and Portugal during the Eurozone crisis within the wider temporal restructuring of global capitalism. First, it has allowed us to demonstrate how the policy response of privatisation is not simply a technical fix pursuing an ‘exit’ from the crisis, but actually an expression of a wider historical project of opening up new areas for commodification and capitalist accumulation. Second, it has allowed our analysis not only to identify and assess strategies of resistance, but also to understand how these are linked to the search for common(s) alternatives that explicitly question the presence of capitalist social relations. Importantly, the concept of water as a commons to be jointly owned and administrated has played a role in both countries, but was most developed by Greek activists. As such, it represents a direct challenge to neoliberal capitalism and its attempt to utilise water as a commodity to make profit. Through a deeper questioning of the role of water as a ‘commons’, resistance has contested the wider ‘historically integrated process’ of neoliberal capitalist restructuring, bringing to the fore possible democratic alternatives that could potentially produce more socially and economically equitable practices and outcomes.

Following the method of incorporated comparison, we have, furthermore, been able to compare the specificities of struggles in the two countries in line with the way in which both are confronted by privatisation pressures through MoUs by the troika, as well as the increasing authoritarian neoliberalism across the EU and how this is reflected within the two national forms of state. Thus, we assessed how the pressure on Portugal was much less direct and less severe than on Greece, where the Athens and Thessaloniki water companies were directly earmarked for privatisation, due to these two countries’ different position within the European political economy, with the former in a less economically dire situation than the latter. Hence, initiatives against privatisation were of a more general nature in Portugal, such as the attempt to include the 2010 UN resolution of ‘water and sanitation are a human right’ in national legislation, while struggles in
Greece focused directly on ensuring continuing state ownership of EYDAP and EYATH. In the struggle over the privatisation of water, it is clear that broad-based alliances have been a key asset in resisting the push for privatisation in Greece and Portugal, especially where dynamics of transnational solidarity are present. Importantly, the close relationship between trade unions and political parties in Greece had become discredited and, as a result, activists were pushed to organise broad-based alliances of trade unions and social movements out of sheer necessity. By contrast, similar efforts have been limited in Portugal as a result of the much closer links between the main trade union and the PCP, which had remained above suspicion. Unsurprisingly, therefore, while the privatisation especially of the Thessaloniki and Athens water companies were stopped in Greece, the current restructuring of municipal bulk water companies held by AdP are potentially the first steps towards privatisation in Portugal.

Public water remains under threat in both countries. As mentioned in regards to Portugal, current corporate reorganisation may simply be laying the foundation for privatisation. Moreover, the recently established minority government of Portugal, led by PS, has a history of privatisation. However, as a PS member of parliament stated, ‘we don’t want to lose control of another strategic asset. We’ve lost too many…so really it’s time to stop’ (Interview 25). Having recently stated that PS is open to re-examining the national citizens’ initiative on implementing the UN resolution of ‘water and sanitation are a human right’, discussed earlier, it would seem this position is holding firm at the moment. In Greece, too, the success of struggles is anything but assured. The negotiations leading up to, and the signing of, a third MoU between the Greek coalition government led by Syriza and the troika in 2015 has put in doubt the decision not to privatise EYDAP and EYATH. While the Council of State ruling has ensured that a majority shareholding will continue to be owned by the state, Syriza has agreed to sell a further 23% of EYATH and 11% of EYDAP, outlined in the privatisation programme of July 2015 (euobserver, 2015). Among activists, there had been an expectation that the government would ‘respect this decision [from the court]’ (The Guardian, 2015b). The fact that it was not respected means that it is difficult for the movements to consider the Syriza-led coalition government as any different from previous Greek governments (The Guardian, 2015b). Syriza also agreed — under immense political and financial pressure — to measures that further entrench practices of authoritarian neoliberalism. The third Greek bailout signed in August 2015 outlines the need to establish ‘a new independent fund (the “Fund”), which will have ‘in its possession valuable Greek assets’ (European Commission, 2015: 28). Again, water companies are included in this new Fund and their future remains uncertain (MacroPolis, 2016; Save Greek Water, 2016). Overall, public water is at the crossroads in Greece and Portugal. While the two countries are pushed towards privatisation, however, there have been numerous examples of re-municipalisation of water services elsewhere in Europe and the wider world, including Paris, Berlin and Jakarta (Lobina et al., 2014; Pigeon et al., 2012). As always, the future of struggles over exploitation is open-ended.

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Notes

1. A Portuguese-based TNC, ‘integrated among the top 100 largest construction companies worldwide and present in three continents and with over 25,000 employees in a total of 22 countries’ (see: http://en.mota-engil.pt/Institucional/Historia (accessed 23 July 2017)).
2. This is evidenced by the fact that the winning bid was 50% higher than the average valuation of the company (Reuter, 2014).

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Author biographies

Andreas Bieler is Professor of Political Economy and Fellow of the Centre for the Study of Social and Global Justice (CSSGJ) in the School of Politics and International Relations, University of Nottingham, UK. He is author of The Struggle for a Social Europe: Trade Unions and EMU in Times of Global Restructuring (Manchester University Press, 2006) and (with Adam David Morton) of Global Capitalism, Global War, Global Crisis (Cambridge University Press, forthcoming). His personal website is http://andreasbieler.net and he maintains a blog on trade unions and global restructuring at http://andreasbieler.blogspot.co.uk
Jamie Jordan is an ESRC PhD candidate in the School of Politics and International Relations and a Fellow of the Centre for the Study of Social and Global Justice, University of Nottingham, UK. He is a board member of the British and Comparative Political Economy Specialist Group of the Political Studies Association, UK. Details of further publications can be found at his Academia.edu page https://nottingham.academia.edu/JamieJordan.

Appendix 1: Interviews

Interview 1: Coordinator of Save Greek Water, Athens, 18 April 2015.
Interview 2: Editor, Macropolis, Athens, 18 April 2015.
Interview 3: General Manager, Hellenic Fund and Asset Management Association, Athens, 20 April 2015.
Interview 4: Head of Research, Greek General Confederation of Labour (GSEE), Athens, 21 April 2015.
Interview 5: Member of Hellenic Parliament, New Democracy, Athens, 27 April 2015.
Interview 6: Minister of Hellenic Government, Syriza, Athens, 29 April 2015.
Interview 7: Professor of European Politics and Economy, Athens University of Economics and Business, Athens, 29 April 2015.
Interview 8: President, PROSKALO, Thessaloniki, 4 May 2015.
Interview 9: Union Member, Thessaloniki Labour Centre (EKTH), Thessaloniki, 4 May 2015.
Interview 10: President, Water Workers’ Union of Thessaloniki (OME-EYATH), Thessaloniki, 5 May 2015.
Interview 11: Organiser, Initiative 136, Thessaloniki, 5 May 2015.
Interview 12: Professor of Coastal Engineering and Oceanography and Organiser, Aristotle University of Thessaloniki and SOS te to NERO, Thessaloniki, 6 May 2015.
Interview 13: Organiser, Thessaloniki Social Clinic, Thessaloniki, 6 May 2015.
Interview 14: Spokesperson, Green Party, Thessaloniki, 6 May 2015.
Interview 15: Organiser, Drama Social Clinic, Drama, 8 May 2015.
Interview 16: Executive Committee Member, Confederation of Greek Civil Servants’ Trade Unions (ADEDY), Athens, 18 May 2015.
Interview 17: President, Athens Labour Centre (EKA), Athens, 20 May 2015.
Interview 18: Minister of Hellenic Government, Syriza, Athens, 25 May 2015.
Interview 19: Organiser, Elliniko Social Clinic, Athens, 26 May 2015.
Interview 20: Professor of Economics, University of Coimbra, Coimbra, 15 June 2015.
Interview 21: PhD Researcher, University of Coimbra, Coimbra, 18 June 2015.
Interview 22: Postdoctoral Researcher, University of Coimbra, Coimbra, 18 June 2015.
Interview 23: Former President, General Confederation of Portuguese Workers (CGTP), Lisbon, 26 June 2015.
Interview 24: Organiser, Precarious Inflexible, Lisbon, 2 July 2015.
Interview 25: Member of Portuguese Parliament, Socialist Party, Lisbon, 3 July 2015.
Interview 26: Organiser, Agua de Todos and the National Union of Workers of Local and Regional Administration, Public Companies, Concessionaries, and Related Companies (STAL), Lisbon, 3 July 2015.
Interview 27: Former Leader and Member of Parliament, Left Bloc, Lisbon, 8 July 2015.
Interview 28: Member of Portuguese Parliament and Committee Member of the Economy, Innovation and Public Works, Portuguese Social Democrats, Lisbon, 14 July 2015.
Interview 29: Assistant Professor of Political Science and Public Policy, Instituto Superior de Ciências do Trabalho e da Empresa (ISCTE) — University Institute of Lisbon, Lisbon, 14 July 2015.
Interview 30: Executive Committee Member, General Confederation of Portuguese Workers (CGTP), Lisbon, 15 July 2015.