Enduring deregulation in Greece: precarious public sector workers and their clients

Abstract

The deregulation of employment in the Greek public sector has produced a new category of precarious workers. Municipal frontline workers, operating Thessaloniki's social provision services, are exemplary of this category, hired on poorly protected, underpaid contracts. In this article, I explore how their subjectivities as precarious workers come into being in everyday encounters, asking what these encounters and emerging subjectivities can tell us about the reconfiguration of class and the inner workings of the Greek state.

I engage the concept of stuckness to show how frontline workers get stuck in precarious jobs, which elicits feelings of resentment. Encounters with clients often magnify such feelings, as they lay bare frontline workers' socioeconomic proximity to the city's poorest population. Encounters with their superiors also intensify feelings of resentment, as they assign frontline workers tasks perceived as diminishing to their status as public sector workers. In and through these encounters, frontline workers' subjectivities appear to be steeped in contradictions. In some instances, they attempt to reclaim their membership in the category of public sector worker by distinguishing themselves from clients, thereby drawing clear-cut boundaries between the state and citizens. In other, they position themselves as citizens, critical of the state and its representatives, producing fleeting moments of solidarity with client-citizens.

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Introduction

> Early on a Tuesday morning, I arrived at the social supermarket of a large municipality in Thessaloniki to observe the monthly distribution of foodstuff parcels. At 9:00 AM, Makis, the supermarket's social worker, came out to the narrow hallway, where beneficiaries were queuing, announcing the beginning of the distribution. Under Makis' watchful eye, the distribution ran smoothly till the end. Afterwards, Makis and I started tidying up, when an elderly man approached the entrance. The man explained his dire situation, speaking in a thick accent, struggling to articulate himself in Greek, which was probably not his first language. Getting progressively more worked up, he demanded that Makis helps him, arguing that though he's lived and worked in Greece for over 30 years, his pension is only 350 euros, and he can't survive on that. Makis pulled the distribution table, barring entrance into the space, and declared sternly: 'Since you are not a registered beneficiary, I can't help you. These are the rules.'. Makis turned his back to the elderly man, pretending to go back to cleaning. But the man continued pleading his case till Makis lashed out: "If you really needed help, you wouldn't just show up here causing a scene". Once the man left, Makis remarked to me: "It wasn't just the fact that he was causing a scene, as if the rest of us aren't struggling. But he could barely speak Greek...you live here for 30 years, you need to learn Greek". (Fieldnotes, 22.11.2023)

During the 8 months I spent conducting ethnographic fieldwork at the social supermarket, I witnessed countless such encounters between municipal frontline workers, such as Makis, and their clients[1]. I was struck by how frontline workers often treated their clients abruptly, denied them help and descended into xenophobic rants. What puzzled me further was that such treatment came in contrast to other instances, when frontline workers attempted to foster a sense of solidarity with their clients. What accounts for frontline workers' seemingly contradictory treatment of their clients? And how can we understand this switch from hostility to solidarity?

To address these questions, one could turn to the Greek anthropological literature on 'the political', which traces how the country's cultural regime of alterity plays out and shapes everyday interactions and public sociality (Παπαταξιάρχης 2015). This regime of alterity is shown to valorize ethnonational sameness and prescribe a hierarchical social order that relegates minorities, such as migrants and leftist political dissidents, at the bottom. Studies emanating from that literature primarily focus at the "margins of the state" (Das and Poole 2004), on populations struggling against and contesting state power (Panourgiá 2009;

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[1] I use the term client in a broad sense to include residents who come into municipal social services to ask for help whether they are registered beneficiaries or not.

Τσιμπιρίδου 2013). Drawing inspiration from this literature, it could be argued that frontline workers' treatment of their clients constitutes an attempt to enact firm lines of ethnonational inclusion and exclusion.

One could also turn to the proliferating literature on street-level bureaucrats (Dubois 2014; Lipsky 2010) and understand such treatment as the result of frontline workers' exercise of their discretionary power. As Maynard-Moody and Musheno (2000) have illustrated, street-level bureaucrats exercise discretion based on personalized judgements, norms and beliefs, which, ultimately, accounts for the Janus-faced nature of the modern state—at once domineering and caring. On a similar vein, and in an effort to account for the duality of the modern state, Koch (2021) coins the term "moral economy of frontline work". Focusing on Britain, she traces frontline workers' attempts to exercise moral agency, acting as a bulwark against market-driven austerity reforms. Koch aptly illustrates the limits of their agency, showcasing how scarce resources necessitate frontline workers to make decisions about whom to prioritize and whom to help; decisions based on moralized judgements about clients' deservingness.

Though both bodies of literature shed light on municipal frontline workers' contradictory treatment of their clients, they leave me dissatisfied on two counts. Firstly, the Greek literature traces "the political", understood not as a pre-existing terrain, but as something constituted from below, in mundane, intimate moments of people's daily lives. Consequently, sites associated with the Greek state, or the central government, are rarely considered in explorations of the political, revealing little about the innerworkings of the state and the actors who enact it. Secondly, while the literature on street-level bureaucrats successfully attempts to humanize state actors, rendering them into full-fledged characters, it tells us little about their subjectivities as workers. It rarely considers their hopes, dreams and aspirations as workers nor their personal biographies, family histories and employment trajectories.

In what follows, I offer a slightly different perspective on municipal frontline workers' treatment of their clients; one that accounts for both the innerworkings of the state and worker subjectivities. To do so, I understand and emplace such treatment in the contemporary Greek context, marked by shifting employment patterns in the public sector. Starting in the 1990s, under the impetus of neoliberal reform, the Greek public sector became a key target of employment deregulation. Following the implementation of austerity measures, in the 2010s, deregulation in the public sector reached its apotheosis, undoing the regime of permanent employment, whilst giving rise to non-standard forms of employment. This has produced a new category of workers in the public sector, defined by the precarious conditions under which the labor. Municipal frontline workers in Thessaloniki

are representative of this emerging category, hired on temporary, poorly protected and underpaid contracts. In light of these broader labor transformations, municipal frontline workers are caught up in a tense dynamic. They are tasked with caring and providing for poor, marginalized citizens, while they are experiencing the slow waning of their own labor rights and material conditions.

In this article, I approach frontline workers' encounters with clients and subsequent outbursts of hostility and solidarity as every day, situated instances, when their subjectivities as precarious workers come into being. Here, I understand processes of subjectivity formation as always incomplete and the category of precarious public sector workers as never stable. It is such incompleteness and instability that, at least partly, account for the shifting dynamics of hostility and empathy. Furthermore, I interpret processes of subjectivity formation as deeply relational: municipal frontline workers are co-constituted as precarious subjects in interaction with others, whether these others may be clients, colleagues or superiors.

Following this line of thinking, in the article's first part, I trace municipal frontline workers' hopes and aspirations in entering the public sector and their subsequent employment trajectories. I show how broader shifts in employment patterns truncate their aspirations and get them stuck in precarious jobs. Drawing from an emerging anthropological body of work on stuckness (Hage 2009; Jefferson, Turner, and Jensen 2019), I ask how they talk about, experience, negotiate and contest stuckness as a state of being. In the article's second part, I engage with ethnographic works on precarious state workers (Giudici 2021; Hendriks 2022a; Howard 2018), as I unpick everyday encounters at the workplace. I explore what triggers, what sets frontline workers off and what makes them tick during these encounters, which variously include interactions with clients, informal conversations among frontline workers, and encounters with their superiors. Ultimately, I ask: what can these everyday encounters, as sites where worker subjectivities take shape, tells us about class and class dynamics; about state-society boundaries and state-citizen relations; and about the innerworkings of the Greek state?

Introducing the main characters: some notes on the term frontline workers and its uses

During my fieldwork at municipal social services, between November 2023 and September 2024, I spent most of my time with a team of nine workers. At the time, the team consisted of a social worker, an administrative employee, six food distributors, and a support staffer. To refer to my municipal interlocutors, I have opted for the term frontline workers to highlight the shared traits that bind them together into a distinct category of workers, that is, of precarious public sector workers. The term has been thoroughly discussed in academic

literature, evoking particular understandings of who and what frontline workers are; understandings that align with my interlocutors' own institutional status. In public administration literature and in policy ethnographies, frontline workers are understood as occupying the lowest rungs of governance hierarchies; as having the least amount of formal authority, but being the closest to citizens; and as responsible for policy implementation and service delivery (Maynard-Moody and Musheno 2000, 333). Similarly, my interlocutors are tasked with the daily operation of the municipal social supermarket and soup kitchens. While this renders them into implementers of social policy, here, I am more interested in them as social actors, attending to their aspirations, hopes and identity as workers (Howard 2018; Singh 2012). Additionally, in delivering these services, municipal frontline workers come in direct, everyday contact with citizen-clients, in ways their superiors rarely, if ever, do. Finally, owning to their temporary contractual status and their limited authority to shape distribution processes or application procedures, they are confined to a marginal institutional position.

Though I foreground their shared characteristics, I do not wish to give the impression that frontline workers comprise a homogenous team, devoid of differences and internal divisions. In fact, these workers occupied different professional roles and positions, which subsequently shaped the division of labor and tasks. For example, the social worker was responsible for maintaining the list of beneficiaries and for assessing the latter's eligibility to access the municipal social services. Contrastingly, food distributors were mainly responsible for handing out foodstuff parcels to beneficiaries. In practice, the division of labor was not so clear-cut, as the social worker often assisted with food distributions, and food distributors frequently reviewed beneficiaries' application documents.

Furthermore, while all municipal frontline workers were positioned at the lowest ends of municipal hierarchies, their team was not horizontally structured, but rather permeated by professional and gendered hierarchies. Professional hierarchies were evident in the fact that the positions of social worker and administrative employee were seen as more prestigious and were compensated as such, because they require a university degree. Contrastingly, the position of food distributor was perceived as inferior to the other two, as it only required a high school diploma and was thus compensated more meagerly. Gender magnified these professional hierarchies, as all the food distributors were women, while the social worker and the administrative employee men. The latter often took it upon themselves to supervise food distributors' work, but also assign them with tasks they perceived as "*ginekies doulies*" [women's work]. *Ginekies doulies* variously included cleaning up the office, keeping the municipal clothing bank tidy and preparing foodstuff parcels.

Employment in the Greek public sector: from permanence to precarity

To understand what is at stake when tracing frontline workers' labor trajectories, it is necessary to scrutinize the historical development of the Greek public sector and the shift from permanent to precarious employment. In the post-WIII period, the expansion of the Greek state manifested in the nationalization of key industries and the rapid enlargement of public sector employment (Ioakimidis 2000). While the state expanded, the fields of state intervention remained largely the same, as there were no significant investments in education, social protection or the provision of social services. Tsoukalas (2005, 94) convincingly argues that mass recruitment in the public sector was more of a political choice. It aimed to bring large parts of the labor force under state control and neutralize the communist influences incited by the Greek civil war.

The politically motivated intervention and role of the Greek state in the labor market, between the 1950s-1970s, led to the bifurcation of the employment trajectories and professional possibilities available to Greek citizens. On the one hand, the upper classes and educated citizens of lower socioeconomic strata were absorbed into the ever-growing public sector and thereby into the state apparatus. This resulted into the fetishization of higher education as one of the few available mechanisms of upward social mobility, especially for the Greek working class (Τσουκαλάς 2005, 119). Workers in the public sector, subsequently, morphed into a prestigious social class, offered permanent contracts, or "jobs for life", wages higher than average and attractive social security arrangements (Kotouza 2019, 38). As a distinct social class, workers in the public sector organized themselves into strong labor unions, vested with ample negotiating power vis-à-vis the state. On the other hand, unskilled or technically skilled workers were scattered across Greece's dilapidated agricultural sector and small, family-owned businesses (Poulimenakos et al. 2021). As such they formed a loosely connected social group, lacking both in formal employment status and in representation. For about 1,000,0000 Greek citizens, migration to Western and Central Europe as gastarbeiters in large factories became the only way out of the poorly protected, unregulated Greek private sector (Τσουκαλάς 2005, 120–21).

These developments resulted in the emergence of deep-cutting labor and class fault lines, as workers in the public sector came to be envied and resented for constituting a kind of "labor aristocracy". But they also had significant implications for the Greek social contract (Burnyeat and Sheild Johansson 2022), as employment came to mediate state-citizen relations and expectations regarding the role of the state in Greek society. The Greek state came to be seen as an employer par excellence, providing and caring for only some of its citizens by offering stable, well-renumerated jobs, while neglecting the rest.

Fast-forward to the 1990s, when the prospect of EU membership kickstarted the slow reversal of state expansion (Koukiadaki and Kretsos 2012), creating shifts in the make-up of the Greek labor market. During that period, reforms were introduced in the pension and public healthcare systems, aimed at making them more cost-effective and lean (Karamessini 2015). As state spending started being diverted away from welfare, focus shifted towards large-scale infrastructural projects, the privatization of public companies and assets, and the opening of state-monopolized markets to the private sector (Kotouza 2019, 56–57). The Greek private sector further benefited from the return of Greek migrants and the arrival of migrants from ex-socialist Balkan countries. The latter were exploited as cheap, undeclared labor primarily in the agricultural sector, making up Greece's pre-crisis precariat (Lawrence 2007; Poulimenakos et al. 2021, 267). Despite these broader reforms and changes, public sector employees and their privileges remained largely intact.

Following the Greek financial crisis, the implementation of austerity measures triggered the wholescale restructuring of the public sector and the aggressive deregulation of employment. This translated into successive cuts in wages and pensions, several rounds of mass layoffs, the enforcement of a hiring freeze and the dissolution of the collective bargaining system (Karamessini 2014). At the same time, flexible, non-standard forms of employment started proliferating. These measures were justified by moralizing discourses that blamed the debt crisis on the supposedly over-bloated and inefficient Greek state and its employees, rendered 'complacent' by their permanent contractual status (Boletsi 2016; Poulimenakos et al. 2021). Such discourses were especially potent as they instrumentalized the labor fault lines already demarcating Greek society and existing animosities against public sector employees.

By the beginning of the 2020s, the country had exited foreign supervision, while the newly elected, conservative, right-wing government was promising Greece's return to normality. Governmental visions of normality have been firmly grounded in the path laid down by austerity (Katsinas and Soudias 2024). This has variously included privatizations in the healthcare and higher education systems and the continued flexibilization of employment in the public sector, which is now increasingly composed of freelancers and workers hired on zero hour or project-based contracts. Consequently, understaffing of public services, such as hospitals and local social provision services, is now becoming an entrenched feature of the public system. Workers in the public sector, stretched thin by decades of neoliberal austerity reforms, have been vociferously protesting both privatizations as well as employment deregulation and its consequences. The government has sought to combat these protests by pathologizing and recasting them as "miserabilism" (Katsinas and Soudias 2024, 12) and by effectively blaming public sector workers for structural deficiencies.

Unfulfilled desires for permanence: frontline workers' employment trajectories

Most of the municipal frontline workers I followed started out their professional careers in the 2000s—a conjunctural moment, when deregulation was already underway, but permanent employment was still the norm. They entered the public sector in pursuit of permanent employment and all the promises folded into it: stability, material security, upward social mobility. These promises were convincing, as in many cases, they were intergenerationally transmitted. Zina, one of the food distributors, was pushed by family members to pursue a career in the public sector, after graduating from a prestigious Athenian university, in 2007. During our interview, Zina recounted: "Both my mother and my mother-in-law were public sector employees and they wanted me to be one too. They thought that this way I would secure a good life". While Zina got her first position in the public sector in 2009, she has yet to attain a permanent contractual status. In sketching Zina's 15-year trajectory, which is as much gripping as it is commonplace, I ask: what happens when desires for permanent employment do not materialize and promises for a "good life" remain unfulfilled?

Zina's first position in the public sector was as lecturer at a university of applied sciences—a gig that paid by the hour. Once her five-month contract expired, she remained unemployed for a year. "Ekana ta xartia mou", she told me with frustration, "and I waited in agony". In this context, to "do one's papers", as is the quote's direct translation, means to apply for jobs. Zina applied for jobs and waited in agony. Eventually, she moved to the waste management department of a large municipality in Thessaloniki, where she was hired on an 8-month contract. Zina described her reaction, when she found out about this appointment: "I was laughing and cheering, that's how thirsty I was for a job, any job". Her contract was renewed twice and then she filed a petition for a permanent one, which was rejected. She remained unemployed for a year, during which she recalled crying a lot, feeling like her "whole life was coming to an end".

This cycle of getting a job, losing that job, becoming unemployed, applying and waiting for a new one repeated several times, till 2018, when Zina got her current position as food distributor at the municipality. Being made to jump from one temporary contractual arrangement to the next elicited intense emotional responses not only for Zina, but for other municipal frontline workers with similar trajectories. Applying and waiting to hear back from jobs elicited agony, anxiety and uncertainty; losing her job incited distress and vulnerability; finding a new job instigated elation and thankfulness. These employment experiences and associated emotional responses made Zina "thirsty for any job", priming her to accept low-paid, precarious work (Kotouza 2019).

During our interview, I asked Zina why she insisted on finding jobs in the Greek public sector, instead of trying her luck elsewhere. "I always told myself that one day I will become permanent, that my 5-month contract will turn into an 8-month contract, then a yearly one, and eventually into a permanent one. And so, it became my *marazi*", she explained. *Marazi* is an affectively loaded noun, which refers to an enduring, lasting distress that arises from an unfulfilled desire. The deployment of the term makes clear that permanent employment in the public sector constitutes an "object of desire" for Zina, through which a cluster of promises pertaining to the "good life" can be attained (Berlant 2011, 23–24). In that sense, it could be argued that Zina, and other frontline workers in her predicament, are enveloped in relations of "cruel optimism". Temporary gigs in the public sector cultivate the frail hope that permanent employment will one day be within reach. The more Zina waits for this frail hope to materialize and the more she invests in it, the harder it becomes to move on, essentially "getting stuck" in an unrelenting cycle of temporary, low-paid jobs (Hage 2009).

Municipal frontline workers as stuck subjects

Like Zina, the rest of the frontline workers were hired in their current positions at municipal social services in 2018, when these services started being financed by EU subsidies. While their contracts get renewed annually, there is always the looming possibility that they get discontinued, if the municipality fails to obtain the EU subsidies, or if shifting EU policy priorities redirect the subsidies elsewhere. The uncertainty of their job tenure produces palpable anxieties over their future prospects. The day after my interview with a municipal policymaker, responsible for obtaining EU subsidies, I arrived at the supermarket, where frontline workers greeted me with a myriad of questions: has the municipality secured funding?; are our contracts getting renewed?; did he say anything about making us permanent? As I didn't have any definitive answers, they started wondering who would hire them if they lost their current positions, doubting they would constitute qualified candidates for the private sector. Their questions reveal how the precarity and uncertainty unleashed by the normalization of non-standard forms of employment are no longer felt as an exceptional state of affairs, heightening frontline workers' sense of stuckness.

To capture human experiences under conditions of permanent crisis, Hage (2009, 56) develops the concept of stuckness, which refers to: "a situation where a person suffers from an absence of choices or alternatives to the situation they are in and an inability to grab such alternatives even if they present themselves". Importantly, frontline workers' questions speak to the temporal dimensions underpinning their experiences with stuckness. For Jefferson et al. (2019, 6), stuckness is structured by particular temporalities, as what seems to be at stake is people's ability to imagine and propel themselves towards the future. Similarly, in asking about the renewal of their contracts, frontline workers lay bare their fear

that their current precarious employment conditions will spill and perpetuate themselves into the future. Doubting that anyone would hire them exposes their inability to envision alternative futures beyond the public sector. Yet, in their questions, fear and doubts co-exist with the fragile hope that obtaining a permanent contract might, in the end, be possible. During interviews, many of my interlocutors expressed the belief that if they worked hard and proved themselves, their supervisors would put in a good word for them, which could get them closer to obtaining a permanent contract.

Jefferson et al. (2019, 2) remind us that stuckness is also a function of the particular spatial forms it takes, inviting explorations of how it is experienced in spatial terms. To talk about how they felt in their current position at the municipality, frontline workers mobilized and reiterated the following expression: "niotho oti exo valtosi" [I feel that I have stagnated]. The verb "valtono", derived from the noun "valtos" [swamp], conveys a sense of stagnation and constrained movement. The expression was used to refer to the limited opportunities available to frontline workers to climb up the rungs of municipal hierarchies, which left them stagnant in their marginal institutional position. The social worker, Makis, infused the expression with a second meaning. Makis believed that social workers ought to spend most of their time out in the field, conducting casework. As this was rarely the case for Makis, he used the expression to highlight how he was confined to his tiny, claustrophobic office, tied to his desk.

As Hage (2009) and Jefferson et al. (2019) urge us not to discount stuckness as mere passivity, I move on to explore how frontline workers navigate their current precarious circumstances and the subjectivities that thereby emerge. Oscillating between fragile hope and abjection, they expended all their energy on what has been variously called persevering, enduring or sticking out their precarious present (Hage 2009; Povinelli 2011). Frontline workers' shifts started early in the morning, when they all gathered at the municipal social policy department for a coffee, before heading out to their respective posts at the various social services. During these early morning coffee sessions, frontline workers often discussed how they make do with their meager wages. For most, this included sticking to a strict budget to cover all the basics, such as grocery shopping, utilities and rent, and their kids' extra-curricular activities. In light of their tight budgets, most refused to treat themselves even to the occasional small gift. Additionally, most of my interlocutors maintained second jobs, which variously included washing dishes at taverns and answering phones at call centers. Clearly, such "pluriactivity" (Poulimenakos et al. 2021, 271) is neither a move away from waged employment nor a negotiating technique vis-à-vis their employers, but a basic survival strategy.

During interviews, I seized the opportunity to discuss these strategies and the labor frontline workers expended to merely endure their precarious predicament. I was particularly struck by the answer of the administrative employee, Kostas: "From the moment I wake up till I go to sleep I try really hard…*moxtho*. I come to work, then I go to my second job, I study for my Master's, I care for my kids. At the end of the day, all I have is my *moxthos*". As the word *moxthos* translates into toil or labor, I read Kostas' statement as exhuming a sense of pride in his ability to make do. Such pride is akin to what Hage (2009, 56) describes as 'heroism of the stuck'—a celebration of one's capacity to stick it out, to be resilient enough to endure their perilous conditions. The emphasis on *moxthos* could also be understood as a technique of self-government, for *moxthos* requires self-disciplining, restraint and control, as revealed by Kostas daunting daily schedule and frontline workers' refusal to treat themselves.

From resentment to hostility: reasserting boundaries between state and citizens

Expending all their energy in merely getting by, frontline workers led a life deprived of the material comforts and luxuries traditionally associated with the middle class. They often complained about their inability to go on vacation or buy a house, and about their modest weekend plans, which usually involved going to their neighborhood "koutouki" [a small inexpensive tavern] for "souvlaki". The emic terms, *koutouki* and *souvlaki,* are both markers of the Greek *laiki* culture, or the culture of "the common people", foretelling palpable class anxieties and doubts. As such, the sense of pride frontline workers felt over their *moxthos*, their ability to endure, sat uncomfortably with the resentment they expressed vis-à-vis their lowly class position and compromised social status. These affects came most forcefully to the fore during frontline workers' encounters with clients, when imagined clear-cut distinctions between the two social groups proved to be far messier and blurry.

> On a rainy Monday morning, in late April, I joined Makis, Kostas and Vasia, one of the food distributors, for the monthly supermarket distribution. At some point during the distribution, Vasia stepped forward to hand out a food parcel, when Makis noticed and discreetly pointed out a hole in her polyester leggings. As Vasia was overtaken by shame, her two colleagues attempted to placate her. Makis pointed to his own worn-out denim pants and T-shirt covered in sweat stains. Kostas gestured at the beneficiaries crowding the narrow hallway outside the supermarket and in a sarcastic tone, commented: "we come to work *rakenditi* [dressed raggedy], exactly like the beneficiaries…there really is no difference between us and them".

This encounter and the affective responses it elicited were by no means exceptional. In fact, coming in close, daily contact with clients, frontline workers' attention was often monopolized by assessments of the formers' clothes, the cars they arrived in and other

material signs of class. Detecting resemblances between their own clothes and appearance and those of their clients, as is the case in the vignette above, set frontline workers off, triggering sentiments of resentment and bitterness. In and through such resemblances, clients came to be a reflection of frontline workers' own precarity and abjection. This process of mirroring reveals the two groups to be socioeconomically proximate, blurring the boundaries between the two and collapsing clear-cut state-society dichotomies. Yet, in other instances, assessments of clients' appearance led frontline workers to believe that the latter were actually in a better predicament than themselves. Encountering clients wearing designer clothes or driving luxury brand cars outraged frontline workers, who made comments of the sort: "if these are the poor, then what are we?!". As frontline workers came to see themselves as increasingly indistinguishable from the city's poorest, and in some cases even as worse-off than them, two things seemed to be at stake. Firstly, their sense of belonging to the category of public sector worker and secondly, their ability to act as representatives of the state.

Here, I want to briefly return to the introductory vignette, where resentment trickles into hostility and exclusion. In doing so, I suggest that frontline workers' hostility could be read as an attempt to ameliorate and "offset their marginal social status", as Howard (2018, 88) puts it, when discussing Ethiopian government workers' boundary making practices. In the vignette, the elderly client legitimates his demand for help by invoking his past trajectory of work and social contributions as well as a sense of national belonging—'I've lived and worked in Greece for over 30 years', he says. Instead of engaging with the man's argument, Makis, the supermarket's social worker, attempts to create affective distance. He does so through concrete spatial strategies—pulling the table in front of the entrance—and bodily techniques—turning his back against the client. Similarly to the Dutch immigration officers Hertoghs (2023, 10) followed, creating distance enables Makis to claim neutrality, turning his rejection of the man's request into a matter of bureaucratic formality.

Yet, his performance of bureaucratic neutrality doesn't last long, as Makis lashes out when the man continues pleading. Makis' statements about how the man is "causing a scene, as if the rest of us aren't struggling" reveal much about the source of his hostility. He interprets the man's pleads as a refusal to wait out his dire situation and as an unwillingness to be part of the 'community of the stuck' (Hage 2009, 57), of which Makis considers himself a member. Makis' comment about the client's supposed failure to assimilate linguistically enable him to enact firm lines of ethnonationalist exclusion. He does so by discursively recasting the man into a racialized other, who doesn't know how to wait and endure in a 'civilized' manner.

Taken altogether, Makis' open display of hostility, the enactment of ethnonational lines of exclusion and his refusal to help the client function as boundary-making practices that allow him to distinguish himself from the client. In doing so, Makis is able to instantiate himself as

an agent of the state and reinscribe himself into the social category of public sector workers. In encounters similar to this one, as frontline workers attempt to navigate their socioeconomic proximity to clients and the challenges it poses to their social status, they give concrete shape to state-citizen relations. At the core of these relations lies disavowal. Frontline workers move between attempts to distance themselves from citizen-clients, seen as abject versions of themselves, and attempts to discipline and teach them that a 'good citizen' is one that knows how to wait.

Moments of solidarity: frontline workers as citizens

Yet feelings of resentment did not solely stem from frontline workers' meager wages, which denied them middle-class material comforts, rendering them increasingly indistinguishable from poor citizen-clients. They also stemmed from the kind of labor and tasks they were routinely assigned to carry out as "*simvasiouchi*", that is, employees hired on temporary contracts. These tasks usually involved arduous manual labor, making them physically taxing and exhausting. One of these tasks related to the monthly delivery of foodstuff donations to the municipality, when frontline workers were asked to unload trucks full of heavy donation boxes and bring those boxes to the supermarket. On delivery days, while carrying out these tasks, frontline workers made bitter, frustrated comments of the sort: "because we are *simvasiouchi*, they've reduced us to *chamalides*", and "I thought this would be an office job, but instead they have us working like *chamalides*".

The term *chamalis*, central to frontline workers' repertoire, refers to an unskilled worker that undertakes heavy manual labor for small tips or pay, an informal profession that was commonplace in the Ottoman times. *Chamalis* has made its way into the contemporary, everyday Greek lexicon, oftentimes leveled as an insult against someone deemed as vulgar, deplorable or of ill repute. The juxtaposition of *chamalis* to someone holding an office job reveals how class-based social divisions in Greece have been structured around distinctions between manual and non-manual labor, skilled and unskilled work (Τσουκαλάς 2005, 87). Undertaking skilled, non-manual labor, Greek public sector workers have been historically constituted as a prestigious social category, enjoying ample of symbolic capital and prestige. The recurring use of the term *chamalis*, however, illustrates how frontline workers, as simvasiouchi public sector workers, no longer see themselves as belonging to a prestigious social category. As such, feelings of resentment also emerge from unmaterialized aspirations for upward social mobility.

Frontline workers laid blame for their compromised predicament on their superiors at the municipal social policy department, who were all *monimi*, that is permanent employees. More specifically, frontline workers contended that their superiors' permanent employment status has rendered them complacent, disinterested and lazy, unwilling to do any of the

grunt work, which they reassigned to *simvasiouchi*. For frontline workers, such complacency exemplified the "pathogenies tou dimosiou sistimatos"—the pathologies of the public system. Such arguments demonstrate how the labor fault lines historically demarcating Greek society, pitting private sector workers against public sector ones, are now increasingly circumscribing the public sector itself, turning *simvasiouchous* against *monimous* employees. These arguments further echo popular discourses mobilized to justify the implementation of austerity measures and the continued deregulation of the public sector by the current government.

Frontline workers, however, never expressed their deep-seated resentment directly to their superiors; they launched their critiques and complains either privately, to each other, or to their clients, who had their own complaints of permanent employees. During one such instance, a client approached Kostas, the administrative employee, and complained about how she had been unable to reach her caseworker—a permanent employee and one of Kostas' supervisors—for over two weeks. Dripping with cynicism, Kostas replied: "dimosii ipalili, ti perimenis?" [what did you expect from the public sector employees?].

In his anthropological study of the cultural construction of Greek national identity, Herzfeld (2020, 27) documents how such inward-facing, disparaging comments circulate in Greek society, among ordinary people. Such comments allow citizens to share their frustrations with the Greek state and critique aspects of the national culture, such as the ills of bureaucracy or the public sector, as Kostas does. By making this cynical remark, Kostas partakes in such everyday social processes of critique and foregrounds himself as a citizen, exasperated by the state and its representatives. Aligning himself with the client, Kostas "underperforms" the state, blurring the boundaries between the state and citizens (Vollebergh, de Koning, and Marchesi 2021, 747). In other such encounters, frontline workers adopted similar approaches to Kostas': they tended to shoehorn permanent employees into the slot of the bad guy, taking their clients' side, thereby allowing for small, fleeting moments of solidarity to emerge.

Municipal frontline workers as collateral labor

Even though frontline workers complained to each other and clients, they always complied with and carried out the tasks assigned to them by their superiors, including those experienced as diminishing. Yet for all their compliance and copious labor, they rarely felt seen, recognized and valued for it. Consequently, the resentments and frustrations they experienced towards their superiors were compounded, as frontline workers also expressed feeling neglected by the state. Such perceived disregard for their labor was a common topic of conversation among frontline workers.

On a Tuesday afternoon, in early December 2023, I joined Vasia and Aphrodite for a soup kitchen distribution. As the distribution was coming to an end and things were quieting down, the two distributors joined me at the lone desk of the tiny, cramped space. Vasia asked if I had heard about the accusations launched against the founder of the renowned solidarity kitchen, O Allos Anthropos, for embezzling money. Before I had a chance to respond, Aphrodite decried how thoughtless the Greek President had been to award the man the most prestigious national award for his social contributions, before conducting a thorough background check on him. Visibly irritated, Vasia exclaimed: "they applaud and give awards to this random guy, while we contribute so much, and no one even knows our names! They disregard us...we are the invisible heroes!".

What appears to set Vasia off, here, is the fact that a "random guy" gets praised and recognized by national political elites, while frontline workers remain nameless, receiving no credit for their contributions. Hendriks (2022b, 128–29) demonstrates how civil servants in Malawi iterate a similar set of frustrations and complaints through the idiom of "stealing shine", mobilized to call out the unjust allocation of praise and recognition. Just as Hendriks' civil servants felt overlooked and outshined, their work eclipsed by NGO workers, Vasia interpreted the attention given to the solidarity kitchen founder as overshadowing the work of public sector employees like herself. Consequently, frontline workers' labor could be seen as doubly undervalued, both in a financial sense—they received meager pay—and in a moral sense—they received no praise or recognition.

Furthermore, "invisible heroes" was a key term in frontline workers' vocabulary and a central trope through which they imagined themselves as state workers. They often mobilized the term in their accounts of the COVID-19 pandemic, when most businesses, stores and services were shut down and people remained in the safety of their homes. However, some kept going into work every single day, including nurses, doctors and supermarket employees, as their labor was deemed essential. My interlocutors constituted part of this group of essential workers, as they continued carrying out food distributions all throughout the pandemic. Frontline workers' predicament as "invisible heroes" speaks to the predatory and contradictory innerworkings of the Greek state. On the one hand, the Greek state is made to appear to work and function in and through frontline workers' labor. Especially during times of acute crisis, such as the pandemic, undertaking such labor comes at a great personal cost, as frontline workers were literally called on to compromise, even sacrifice, their bodily integrity for the social reproduction of the Greek population writ large. On the other hand, and despite their centrality, frontline workers remained largely neglected, their labor treated as collateral.

In her work with precarious reception workers in Italy, Guidici (2021, 37) showcases how they similarly experience the state system as "abusive, predatory and confusing". She further demonstrates how such experiences elicit feelings of vulnerability and resentment, which prompt workers to mobilize and contest contradictory state policies. Contrastingly, in the Greek context, feeling neglected, uncared for by the state, municipal frontline workers in Thessaloniki do not present similar political inklings. Rather, returning to Vasia's conversation with Aphrodite, it appears that they yearn for the state to "see them" (Jansen 2018; Street 2012) and acknowledge the importance of their labor.

Conclusion

In this article, I have explored how the deregulation of employment in the Greek public sector has produced a new category of precarious workers, focusing on their subjectivities and affective states. Tracing their employment trajectories, I have shown how they get stuck, as their aspirations remain unfulfilled, and they oscillate between frail hope for the future and uncertainty. In unpicking precarious workers' subjectivities as they come into being during everyday encounters at the workplace, I have argued that we can glean much about class reconfiguration, state-citizen relations and the innerworkings of the Greek state.

Here, I want to conclude by reflecting on the political possibilities for collective action and dissent afforded under conditions of generalized precarity. Municipal frontline workers in Thessaloniki do not exhibit radical political dispositions: more akin to, and perhaps in some ways part of, the Greek precariat, they focus on enduring their compromised conditions rather than calling for structural change. Rather than robust solidarities, socioeconomic proximity to clients breeds resentment and disavowal, as it challenges frontline workers' ability to enact themselves as a distinct social group. Rather than robust worker solidarities, frontline workers' lowly institutional position elicits animosity and frustration against permanent employees, leading the former to reproduce dominant, governmental discourses. Finally, even though they are treated as collateral labor, frontline workers shy away from mobilizing against the state system, yearning for the latter to recognize their value.

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