Mega-events and, especially Olympic Games, create for the organizing cities a seemingly unprecedented field of opportunities. Those cities may become recognizable centers in a global economy and gain renewed momentum in an ongoing race for investments and development. From this perspective, the evaluation of the impact those events have on “host” cities can be primarily focused on economic factors and procedures (Andranovich et al. 2001b:33-52). There is however a whole set of related phenomena, including government decisions, bid campaigns, security measures and various types of people participation, which deeply affect not only the economy of cities (and states) but also the forms of urban governance and corresponding politics. Olympics and other such urban mega-events accelerate transformations in the distribution and geometry of power. Olympics also help to disguise those transformations, hiding them behind urgently necessary “administrative” decisions which are supposedly meant to ensure and promote the success of a collective (and “good for all”) endeavor.

A focus on the Athens 2004 Olympics will help illustrate the process of such implicit or explicit transformations by exploring the logic and the forms of specific policies concerned with the preparation period as well as the logic of ideologically specific campaigns which were meant to legitimate decisions and measures taken. It will be shown, that a prevailing ideology of modernization combined with a legitimated necessity for fast decisions and emergency measures has effectively produced an emergent from of urban governance which can be provisionally termed as “a city in an ongoing state of exception”.

Modernization as a mythologized promise

Let us first see how the prospect of a successful organizing of the Athens 2004 Olympics was presented as an opportunity for the city. If we are to believe the introductory statement to the law which modified the Master Plan of Athens for the sake of Olympic mega-works: The country not only the city of Athens will [would] become more “competitive”
in the existing globalized economy...Especially the city or Athens will [would] become an important global center for "quality services" and "entrepreneurial opportunities" (Law 2730/1999 article 1/b)

Marshal Berman, a clever examiner of the experience of modernity, talks about a "Faustian model of development" in an effort to describe the modernization process (Berman 1983: 74). This model contains a series of visions about the future, which is propelled by a will for production, a will for ever-increasing rhythms of change. Strong faith in the future sustains Faustian utopia, a utopia that would produce a genuine tragedy: "insatiable development has left spectacular devastation in its wake" (ibid 78).

During the preparations for Athens Olympics, the Faustian visionary of development was summoned once more in the hegemonic rhetoric: modernization, as a promise, was conquering every discourse on economic growth, global competition and individual opportunities. And of course, the city was to become the site, the fuel and one of the major propelling forces of the modernization process. More than that, the city was to become the generator of images which were going to prove that modernization was indeed happening. The city as an "immense construction site" (ibid 75), was an everyday experience for most of the city's inhabitants and was projected in images and posters which were meant to establish a shared feeling of laborious and feverish creation.

Of course these images and, even more, the works which were publicized through them, represent a highly selective plan for the transformation of metropolitan space. In spite of the promises that the city in its entirety would profit from the Olympics, the choice of the areas for the construction of the Olympic facilities was in direct opposition to the Athens Master Plan which has the status of a state law (Law 1515/1985). Among the explicit aims of this Master Plan was to control the growth of Athens, to protect the seashore from an uninhibited urbanization, to create and sustain specific urban centers, to organize land uses and to coordinate transportation systems. We could describe this Plan then as part of an effort to minimize the problems of a large metropolitan area which has evolved to a city-state or, rather, to a city which absorbs an entire state. Needless to say that the Master Plan had not predicted any potential change in the metropolitan area in order to host a mega-event.

If there was any will at all by the government and local authorities to use the Olympics as an opportunity for a welfare oriented urban restructuring, they would at least follow the main directions of the Master Plan which could ensure a programmed urban development. The idea to use the occasion in order to improve urban infrastructure, for example, could mean indeed to improve transportation, public space networks and green city areas. It may look as a relevant good result that during the Olympic preparation days a huge free highway was created to relieve Athens from traffic congestion, that the metro was substantially developed and that a small network of tramways was constructed. But, "Attiki Odos" existed as a plan well before the Olympics. And it became the first really "private" highway in Greece as it was constructed by a consortium
of private enterprises which charges considerable tolls in order to profit from the use of the highway. Metro was indeed developed but not in order to connect the most neglected and populated districts with the center but to create even better connections for areas which already had adequate public transportation lines but were situated near Olympic sites or along Olympic routes. And finally, tram was introduced to the city with no adequate planning and cost projection, becoming thus a rather expensive for the state and not useful for many citizens means of transportation.

Modernization, thus, was indeed characterized by a “business-oriented approach to the development and use of public space” (Andranovich et.al. 2001a:115). Public space was to become a valuable and publicly subsidized asset to be used as a productive force in a “consumption-oriented development”. And of course, as in many other Olympic host cities, this kind of “development” meant only one thing: tourism, more tourism.

The Faustian imaginary of development, essentially had to adjust itself to a demand for marketable urban images. And Athens had a very strong advantage in this area of image production: its history and especially the mythologies that have appropriated and reconstructed this history. Was modernization then forced to come in terms with tradition? A quite precarious ideological mixture indeed! But modernizing imaginaries and modernizing ideology could, and had, easily resolved this seeming contradiction. History, mythologized history, just became the preferred wrapping paper for the selling of modern commodities. Images of the past were used to create the necessary identity-as-trademark of the city. Modernization as a power which was carrying promises for a better and prosperous future, was absorbed by a consumer tourist phantasmagoria. And every work, choice of planning and public investment was to be subordinated to this goal.

Modernization assumed the characteristics of a staged spectacle: A staged spectacle for the tourists, culminating in the Olympic Games themselves, as the spectacle of spectacles. A staged spectacle for the city’s inhabitants too, because they had to be “inspired” in order to “participate”. We know that in the so called successful Barcelona Olympics people were drawn to the Olympic city-renovation myth by a “city patriotism” campaign (Albet I Mas 2005:236 and Busquets 2005). In Athens, people were summoned by the modernizing myth, carefully packaged in a “national pride” myth (which was immersed in Ancient Greece’s glory). The necessary creation of an imaginary “we”, which became the propelling force of a heroic enterprise, was thus based on the reconciliation of the two opposing poles between which Modern Greek national identity oscillates: “uniqueness”, based on a selective appropriation of history as opposed to “inclusion” into a European modern cosmopolitanism (Stavrides 2008). For Greeks, as for Athenians, this oscillation has produced many unsolvable and traumatic contradictions, depending of course on the ways hegemonic ideologies employed or corroborated those poles in each specific historic period.

Olympics seem to have resolved this contradiction transcribing it to a spectacle. The “we” was crafted by images and slogans, as for example
the one of the Attiki Odos publicity campaign, which says: “Combined we produce miracles. Co-passengers to the future”. It is this “we” which would appear as a collective “host” for the Olympic athletes and visitors: the Athens 2004 slogan was no less than a “Welcome Home”.

Signature architecture was used in support at this modernization-turned-to-spectacle process which provided both to the Athenians and to the visitors images of recognizable global urban emblems. Sharon Zukin thinks that superstar architects, “create a standardized form, that they move from place to place” (Zukin 1991: 47). But signature architecture actually creates unique buildings – objects, which attempt to become, and usually do, situated urban landmarks. Uniqueness, then, as in the fusion of national pride with the modernist cosmpolitanism, becomes a globally recognizable uniqueness. Olympics is, after all, an enormous process of branding and re-branding, city branding included.

The whole process, then, of the preparations for the city to host the Olympics was not simply an economic endeavor. During this period an important hegemonic ideology crystallized. This ideology offered to Greeks a common dream and a promised identity: “Europeans”, to be respected all over the world and, more than that, prosperous Europeans (Stavrides 2008). At last Greece would become part of the “first” word.

A legitimized state of exception

This promise, and the ideology which guaranteed it, attempted to build an unprecedented social consensus. And, indeed, a very strong public support was achieved. What however is the most important and dangerous result of this consensus is that it was used as leverage for a shift in the state – citizen relations. State power acquired a new kind of legitimacy comparable to that of a period of “national war”. “United we will win” actually means, in such a context, that people trust those who govern, those who lead, those who “lead the way”. But this has another important result. Whatever seemed as (or was) an obstacle to this effort, would have to be removed as dangerous. The Olympic dream had the power to erase what was against it, even if those obstacles causing delay were connected to important rights, to established laws and control mechanisms or to protected public goods. The Olympic dream thus became a powerful legitimizing force in support of an imposed “state of exception”. Laws were de facto suspended, surpassed or changed in the name of a superior common cause: the success of the Athens Olympics.

According to G. Agamben (1998 and 2005), a state of exception is not simply a period of lawlessness or brutal suppression, although state violence can be more than prominent in such a period. What characterizes the act of declaring a state of exception is a “lawful” suspension of the law (1998:21 and 28). The state (or any other kind of sovereign authority) appears to take such a decision in order to protect the society from an imminent external or internal threat. The power, however to take such a decision is exclusively at the hands of a “legitimate” authority. A state
of exception is not the overthrow of an established authority (as in the case of a coup d’etat), but the exercise of an authority’s ultimate right: the right to suspend rights. This is why during such a period the law is not violated but suspended: the “force of law” remains (Agamben 2005:39) as a form of legitimacy that gives the authorities the right to impose rules by decrees. In decrees instrumentality and effectiveness replace justice. Authority imposes its rules as necessary measures meant to eliminate a threat.

The state of exception has two important prerequisites which integrate it to the processes of dominant power’s reproduction: only the sovereign authority has the right to suspend the law and only this authority has the ultimate power to define a threat that can be faced through the suspension of law. According to Carl Schmitt’s famous diagnosis (to which Agamben agrees), “sovereign is he who decides on the [state of] exception” (Schmitt 2005: 5).

An essential part of the legitimization of a state of exception is its temporary character. Authorities are supposedly obliged to declare the end of such a period when the threat is effectively eliminated. What happens however when authorities decide that a certain kind of threat is always present no matter how vague its source and its characteristics? We know that the “war against terrorism”, for example, may justify, and indeed has justified, the suspension of certain rights for many people and for unspecified time: the very characteristics of the “terrorist threat” are so vague (although vigorously presented through media image rhetoric) that the state can always claim the necessity for taking preemptive measures.

Agamben has described the normalization of the state of exception as a process in which “the state of exception becomes the rule” (2005:86). It is not certain that when this condition becomes permanent “the juridico political system transforms itself into a killing machine” as he maintains (ibid.), although this indeed has happened in various cases (as in Nazi extermination camps for example). What is important, however, is to observe how a loosely defined but ubiquitous threat may legitimize decisions to bypass existing laws for indefinite time or to impose emergency laws which remain effective as necessary pillars of a newly established politico-legal condition. This is what happened in Greece, as we shall see, when extra measures taken before and during the Olympics were employed afterwards to allegedly face and control a socio-economic crisis with no apparent (although always promised and postponed) end.

During the preparation period for the Athens Olympics, the threat to society was equated to a possible collective failure, to the possibility of not being able to be ready for the Games in time. Urgent decisions, urgent measures and urgent procedures were justified because such a failure would destroy the “dream”. State authorities were expected to act as in a situation of emergency. “Even though the promise of Olympics does not eliminate regulatory requirements for planning, the Olympics are prestigious enough to force quick decisions” (Andranovich et. al.
In Athens, however, “quick decisions” were transcribed to laws, laws that would essentially suspend established procedures for environmental care and control and building regulations. At this level, two pre-Olympics laws are important, the one already mentioned (2730/1999) and the one that followed (2947/2001) in order to cover the gaps created by the former. The first one characteristically changed the preconditions of “compulsory expropriation”, a process guaranteed by the obligation of the state to prove that any such act is done in the interest of public good. According to article 6/3 of 2730/1999, land taken in the name of public good can be given to private enterprises as long as they will construct facilities to be included in the Olympic venues. Also, Olympic building permits, which normally had to be issued after specific control procedures, were transferred to a special administrative authority which could surpass control mechanisms to speed up the process (article 51b of 2947/2001). And, of course, as already mentioned, 2730/1999 has changed important parts of the Athens Master Plan in order to ensure the prompt construction of the Olympic Village in a socially and environmentally inappropriate area.

Pre-Olympics “exceptional measures” justified State actions against various vulnerable groups of the city. As the COHRE report mentions, “There have been reports about... the persecution against certain categories of persons who could give the city ‘a bad picture’. It has been noted for example that prosecutors liberally issued decrees ordering the confinement of drug addicts and homeless to mental institutions, while the police allegedly sought to confine asylum seekers in special camps, away from the Olympic Venues” (COHRE 2007:15). Roma communities also had to face “quick decisions”: In Aspropyrgos tents were destroyed and the tent dwellers were driven out of the area in an operation of Olympic “cleaning up” during the summer of 2000 (ibid. 17).

The Olympic dream tacitly encouraged various acts which de facto suspended laws connected to labor rights too. Contractors and subcontractors responsible for huge Olympic construction works almost completely ignored security measures, hired people with very low day wages, exploited “illegal” immigrants and extended the working hours period beyond any legal boundary. At least 14 workers died in those “pharaonic” construction sites and many were injured in labor accidents. But local and central authorities looked the other way, or even praised nonstop labor as a guarantee for the timely completion of the Olympic works.

Perhaps the most important issue which corroborated decisions connected to the Olympic state of exception was the issue of security. Athens Olympics were the first to be organized after 9/11 and the prevailing anti-terrorist hysteria called for extra security measures. Major Western state governments appeared from the beginning extremely demanding. The possibility of them withdrawing from the Olympics was used to force Greek government to comply with extra security, super-surveillance demands. Under such pressure “Greece actually surrendered sovereignty accepting the tutelage of a multinational security consortium, a seven-nation Olympics Advisory Security Team
comprising the US, the UK, Germany, Israel, Australia, France and Spain” (Samatas 2011: 3351). Greece, to put it briefly, was “obliged to purchase the latest US and EU security and surveillance technology” (ibid.), or, should one say, that Greece was actually blackmailed in order to do so?

The results were economically disastrous and socially hazardous. The publicized super expensive system C4I never really worked, as the company who designed it admitted, but was paid in full. Furthermore, security expenses reached an astronomic 1.5 billion USD amount (Boyle and Haggerty 2009:261) and established a militarized fortress-like urban environment. Samatas, who compares Athens and Beijing Olympics in terms of surveillance policies and legacies, thinks that public action and resistance in post Olympic Athens managed to inhibit the “authoritarian impact” (ibid 3359) of such measures in the everyday life of the city. The ideal, however, of super-surveillance as a means to ensure public safety was successfully implanted in collective imaginary during a period of exception. What was presented as a temporary security regime, bordering informal martial law, came to be recognized after the Olympics as an important legacy in the war against terrorism and crime. People became accustomed to cameras overlooking many public areas. So called “traffic” cameras were and are explicitly used for monitoring demonstrations. Jon Coaffee shows how the same rhetoric of necessary traffic monitoring served to routinize surveillance in London through cameras initially installed for anti-terrorist purposes (2004: 292-3). Although Greeks strongly distrust their country’s state, and although many demonstrations used to include a symbolic or actual blinding of police controlled cameras, security through extensive surveillance, which defies individual and collective rights, has reached a level of considerable legitimacy due to the Olympics highly mediatized anti-terrorist security campaign.

Exceptional circumstances were presented as in need for exceptional measures. However, after the Olympics those measures were presented as part of an ongoing need for “public safety”. Whatever that means, it includes a rather vague and diffuse feeling of threat for the society which calls for even more extra measures.

A model of urban governance

We have seen that the Olympics were understood and prepared as an exception to normal everyday urban life. This along with a growing fear that Greece would not be ready in time and that security threats were well beyond a small state’s power to reach, had created a widely accepted state of exception. The Olympic dream, thus, justified the change of laws, the surpassing of environmental and building regulations, the giving up of national sovereignty and limitations on civil liberties and rights. In various ways, therefore, and not in terms of an imposed security mania only, during the pre-Olympic and Olympic Games period the state of exception was effectively tested as a powerful tool of urban
control. This tool actually proved very useful in corroborating a model of urban governance grounded in urban transformations that shape contemporary metropolises as partitioned heterogeneous worlds. What has been termed the “city of enclaves” (Marcuse and Van Kempen 2002 and Stavrides 2010) is both an urban form and a model of urban spatial order. In the city of enclaves people learn to live, work and consume in specific and spatially defined conditions which shape their habits and mould their imagination. In those spatial enclaves protocols of use and security often replace general laws and rights and acquire the status of a site-specific administrative legality. In a gated neighborhood, in an airport, in a mall or in an office tower, people have to abandon certain supposedly universal rights (as f.e. the right to privacy, the right to express deviant opinions in public, the right to choose what to wear or how to address others, the right of access to allegedly public spaces, the right to belong to cultural or religious groups whose members, depending on the context, are considered as potential thieves, terrorists, prone to violent behavior or to illegal drug usage and so on). To paraphrase Augé, upon entering an urban enclave as a department store or a fancy restaurant you have to prove your innocence in advance (1995:102).

Urban enclaves are integral parts of an urban governance model based on administrative acts and rules that legally and politically look like the conditions imposed in a state of exception. In the name of security, order and often in exchange of unobstructed consumer pleasures (as in a multiplex cinema or in a shopping centre) or in order to “efficiently” organize work (which means upgrading exploitation as in urban sweatshops and corporate buildings), the suspension of rights guaranteed by law appears as a necessary act of localized authority. This authority (either private or public) legitimizes such exceptional acts either by being disguised as pure management or by being dressed as the efficient guarantor of the most important public goods at the expense of other less important ones (as the individual or public rights which are suspended or seriously injured).

In Olympic facilities the “city of enclaves” model reached its culminating point. People had to face extreme surveillance and control measures to enter the different Olympic venues. And they were forced to accept the fact that everybody was considered as suspect. Learning to live in a city where extra security measures define public space enclaves by a no-go red zone means learning to accept that the city can be “under siege” (Stavrides 2010:24). Learning to work, live and act in urban enclaves under the strict obligation that you conform to the situated regulations, means learning to inhabit spaces of exception.

It was not simply that the Olympics introduced a state of exception justified by exceptional circumstances. It is that the Olympics produced the opportunity to elevate the “city of enclaves” model to a recognizable and almost indisputable model of social organization. Olympics offered a great service to the “normalization of exception”. Nowadays people have to accept that their society is under constant threat, and live their lives in a constant search for protection and predictability in a period
during which an enormous economic crisis directly affects the rules and forms of social reproduction. Citizenship is no longer a guarantee for protected and worthy to live lives. Citizens are enclave-bound users, quasi-citizens who only have precarious rights that may be suspended by the state or any equivalent localized authority which both defines a threat and the means to control it.

A large number of people live even below this line of formal citizenship. So called “illegal” immigrants, sans papiers people, are in the mercy of spatially defined normalized states of exception. They cannot or are not allowed to claim their rights as humans in need of support when they are arrested as “illegal” urban dwellers in police blocks and they cannot expect to be treated according to labor protection laws. Revealingly, even the definition of homelessness in a law passed in 2012 (4052/12) with the declared aim of providing care to a highly vulnerable group of people, limits state support to those “legally residing in the country”, a condition added after the direct proposal of the neo-fascist party LAOS during the discussion in the Greek Parliament (Arapoglou 2013: 53-54).

People below the line of formal citizenship mostly have to live in stigmatized enclaves of misery and exploitation, always vulnerable to racist threats. After all, the state of exception, in its most aggressive and lasting form, is fundamentally shaped and often legitimized by racist divisions that define victimized people as guilty or as prime suspects for any kind of crime. Non-citizens experience life conditions at the limit point of a process of advanced “enclavism” (Atkinson and Blandy 2005). Urban enclavism, thus, culminates in “advanced marginality”, to use Wacquant’s term, (Wacquant 2008), or, rather, in “advanced marginalization”. It is not by chance that it was those people who had to suffer mostly in the Olympic construction sites, which were like pilot working places in which the suspension of labor rights was firstly imposed before becoming normalized in the current crisis lawmaker.

Olympic state of exception elevated the normalization of emergency measures to an unavoidable and indisputable condition of urban governance. Enclave logic and enclave experiences not only proliferated but also acquired an exemplary status in the pre-figuration of a mythologized future city of total “security” and promised uninhibited consumption. Especially in the current period of social and economic crisis, during which the Greek state is on the border of bankruptcy, this necessity for a never ending state of exception is emphatically declared. Dominant discourses (both in Greece and abroad), present the case of this society as an exceptional case to be treated through exceptional albeit exemplary policies. One of these discourses’ paradoxes is the strange necessity that combines example with exception. If Greece is an exception what is the use of paradigmatically punishing its people with explicitly publicized severe austerity measures? A revealing paradox indeed: the exceptionality of the Greek case is in reality a structural characteristic of the “debt society” (Lazzarato 2012, Stavrakakis 2013) which is becoming a universal model and a threat to democracy (Stavrakakis 2013). “What,
then, if exceptionalism is used here within the scope of a neocolonial ‘divide-and-rule’ strategy with universal applicability?” (ibid.: 35).

People seem ready to accept that a period of exceptional measures has no predictable end. Their life is based on the experience of inhabiting exception. Many were convinced that the period of pre-Olympics exception contained promises. They were lured by these promises as they used to be lured by the false promises of metropolitan phantasmagoria in the recreation and consumption enclaves of the city. Exception is and was connected to fantasized privileges and for few those privileges become a reality. After all, a great variety of relative privileges exists for people who manage to be admitted to different enclaves (of various degrees of “exclusivity”). Accepting exception as normal is thus connected for many to opportunity, even in a period of crisis. “I at least will make it” summarizes the most modest and the most arrogant hopes in today’s Greece.

Based on the ideology of the effectiveness of emergency measures which was widely accepted during the Olympics, crisis emergency lawmaking presents itself as the only guarantee for exiting the crisis. In direct connection to such an overarching ideology which prolongs indefinitely the legitimacy of extra measures a new law was passed which suspends various environmental and economic obligations for potential investors as long as the investment they propose is above a certain economic level. It is not by chance that this law was called (nicknamed?) “fast track” (in English!)

According to an article for the Greek Law Digest (The “Ultimate Legal Guide to Investing in Greece” which is developed “under the auspices of the Greek Ministry of Development, Competitiveness and Shipping... and is available via the sites of all Greek state authorities”), “the principal aim of Fast Track Law (Law 3894/2010 as amended by Law 4072/2012 and Law 4146/2013) is to accelerate the licensing procedures for investments deemed strategic to the Greek economy” (Avgerinos 2013). This means that if the proposed investment is high enough planning regulations, environmental protection laws and building rules may be suspended. A presidential decree is to be issued in each case, bypassing the Parliament as a lawmaking elected body, which establishes specific project connected building regulations (concerning f.e. the maximum height of buildings, site coverage ratio, amount of allowed building surface etc.) Any public consultation connected to important projects affecting large parts of the city or region is also eliminated in this process. Once again, emergency justifies an endless but promising state of exception.

One of the most important ministers of the government which has implemented the extra austerity measures imposed by the banks and IMF, explicitly referred to the Athens Olympics period to justify them: We need a new model of governance effective and quick in its decisions. This model already proved its efficiency during the Olympics period, he said.

Effective and quick decisions have changed the very constitutional foundations of social welfare and the public sector. The reorganization
of social and urban life was directly affected by legal acts that went as far as to redefine the meaning of "public good" and "public property". According to the "Emergency Implementation Measures for the mid-term Fiscal Adjustment strategy 2012-2015" (voted by the Greek Parliament on June 2011), a crucial distinction between the "private property of the state" and the "public property of the state" was introduced. If an asset of the State is declared as state private property then it can be sold, since it allegedly does not represent a space or a resource which is vitally important to remain under public (state) control and protection. The state, thus, may choose to sell public buildings, public beaches, public companies etc. in order to get money to pay back loans. No matter how heavy, unjust or even predatory the terms of those loans, the state's obligations to the banks were elevated to the status of absolute priority. This implicitly means abandoning the state's constitutional obligations to guarantee citizens basic rights to health, food, education etc. It is more than obvious that privatization of public assets (public land included) barely has legal limits any more. Where will governments draw the line between public and private property of the state? What kind of property is a forest, a lake, a coast, a public square, a public hospital? Emergency sell-out redefines the meaning and boundaries of public sector.

The so-called "memorandum governments" have launched major legal and political reforms which attempt to deal with crisis by destroying anything that might endanger the privileges of governing economic elites. And public-private partnerships, this euphemism for publicly funded private profit ventures, appear as the key to a renewed promise for development.

The case of the selling of Hellinikon former airport area near Athens is a highly indicative example in this context. The area has been one of the most important publicly owned assets that the Greek government chose to sell in pursuit of money to allegedly pay an important part of public debt. This choice completely ignored a widely supported demand to convert the area gradually to a large metropolitan park (which is actually the only chance for Athens to have such a park and thus partially satisfy the urgent need for large green spaces in a congested city with many environmental problems). The main conclusion of a symposium organized by the adjacent municipalities, the National Technical University of Athens, the Technical Chamber of Greece and the Committee for the Metropolitan Park of Hellinikon explicitly summarizes the criticism launched against the emergency privatization plans for the site: “These plans employ the arguments that privatizing and developing the site of Hellinikon ‘will bring money to the country’, ‘will contribute to economic development’, and ‘will create thousands of new jobs’. However, the fact is that the area is up for sale for an unacceptably low price by any measure, any resulting privatization proceeds will be used to pay just a few monthly installments of the Greek state debt, while the Greek state will cover the huge cost of the construction of urban highways and utilities infrastructure well beyond the area, as well as the high costs of relocating the existing uses, both of which are
preconditions for the real-estate development of the site.” (Hellinikon brochure 2013). Emergency sell-out completely defies the priorities of collective urban well-being and welfare.

Public-private partnerships meant, in the case of Athens Olympics, an opportunity for very few to become very rich. “Legally” or “illegally”. But it also meant that accountability was and is no longer an issue. Justifying public decisions means sharing information with the public and giving opportunities for public participation. Important decisions were and are taken outside the procedures of representative democracy (already crippled anyhow). Thus, it is not by chance that the government has created the Hellenic Republic Asset Development Fund (TAΠΕΔ) with the legal form of a limited liability company to which every public property asset on sale was transferred. This company is obviously not obliged to public accountability in selling public property.

The lesson of Olympics can be more or less contained in this phrase: if we have to choose between democratic control and development (or “economy’s” rescue) we will not hesitate to sacrifice democracy. This is after all the complete meaning of the state of exception. Democracy is suspended in the name of efficiency, efficiency in facing a threat, efficiency in establishing a promise. Modernization was an ideology of “success for all”. And a key to renewed state legitimacy. The Olympic dream soon was to become an after-Olympics nightmare. What remains, however is a juridical-political model of governance which continues to base its legitimacy on the idea that democracy is an obstacle to prosperity. A state of exception has become the rule. Strangely though, this period of falsified promises seems to return as a nightmare for the governing elites. People seem nowadays to react, seem to ask for justice and continue to struggle in defense of a destroyed public sector. And what is more, struggle takes forms which directly oppose the state of exception: direct democracy is once again evoked and practiced in various initiatives in contemporary Athens (Syntagma square occupation became emblematic of this process). But this is another story. And it is still been written...
References


