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Political rhetoric, identities, and dominant gender representations: hegemonic masculinity in service of pro-austerity rhetoric in Greek political discourse

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ABSTRACT
This article examines the construction of hegemonic masculinity in Greek political discourse, by analysing minutes from the Greek Parliament at the height of the economic crisis in 2010–2012. Based on Connell’s concept of hegemonic masculinity and the application of a discursive approach inspired by Laclau and Mouffe ([1985]. Hegemony and socialist strategy: Towards a radical democratic politics. London: Verso), the article asks: (1) which discourses constituted the rhetoric of Greek elite politicians regarding economic policies during the crisis and (2) which hegemonic concepts of masculinity and femininity did Greek elite politicians elaborate upon and discursively position themselves in. It also reflects on the implications of the gendered speeches of these elite politicians. The article shows how the rhetoric of elite politicians includes different identities normatively related to manhood. The article argues that the construction of these gender dominant gender representations in the political discourse has severe implications in terms of functioning as a means of justification of austerity measures in Greek economy with negative consequences for politics and society. It is also argued that by adopting elements of hegemonic masculinity, Greek elite politicians contribute to creating an image of a powerful man to whom citizens should adhere, hence reproducing the male (white and heterosexual) norm.

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Introduction

In recent years, studies into the political implications of the economic crisis in Europe from a gender perspective have flourished. At the core of this research is the European Union (EU) austerity politics and related institutional and policy changes, the Europeanization of gender equality and policies in times of crisis, and the gender and intersectional patterns of resistance and struggle against austerity politics (See Kantola & Lombardo, 2017). This article builds on and complements this research by analysing the gendered aspects of the economic crisis in Greece, with a particular focus on the
prevalence of dominant gender norms in the political rhetoric of elite politicians during the first years of the economic crisis, and the implications of this gendered political rhetoric on the Greek political and societal landscape. By conducting an empirical case study of Greek elite politicians’ advocacy of austerity measures during the economic crises in the country, the study investigates how dominant gender representations are produced and re-produced and how the male norm is stabilized and naturalized in the political rhetoric. Based on Connell’s concept of hegemonic masculinity and the application of a discursive approach inspired by Laclau and Mouffe (1985), this article contributes with new insights in research on the use of gender norms in political rhetoric in general and in Greek politics in particular. By this theoretical point of departure, this study on Greek political debate on the economic crisis 2010–2012 exposes hidden dominant gender representations and explains their role as tools of persuasion. The use of dominant gender representations in political rhetoric is identified and analysed by answering two research questions. The first question asks to identify the discourses which constitute the rhetoric of Greek elite politicians regarding economic policies during the crisis. Answering this question leads to the next research question: which hegemonic concepts of masculinity and femininity do Greek elite politicians elaborate upon and discursively position themselves in. Based on these two questions, we will in the conclusion reflect on what implications the gendered speeches of these elite politicians have for the political decisions made. By subjecting themselves to elements of hegemonic masculinity, it is argued that Greek elite politicians contribute to creating an image of a powerful man to whom citizens should adhere, hence reproducing the male (white and heterosexual) norm.

Greece is an illustrative example of the debt crises in the Eurozone in the years following 2008 global financial crisis. Among the countries of the Eurozone, Greece suffered the most with the implications of the crisis still visible in all fields of economic, political, and social life, despite signs of improvement, at least before the Covid-19 pandemic. Characteristic examples of the problems that the country has experienced are the enormous financial debt, the continuous and ongoing high unemployment rate, and the entrance of a ‘Golden Dawn’ neo-Nazi party in the parliament in 2012, which in October 2020 was condemned as an illegal organization by a Greek court. Given this situation, Greece is an excellent empirical example for a study on the ways in which hegemonic and normative concepts of men and masculinity are embedded in the elite political discourse concerning austerity. It is suggested that this rhetoric implicitly supports and facilitates the implementation of draconian economic policies.

Previous research – masculinity and political rhetoric

The use of dominant gender representations in political rhetoric has, to some extent, been explored in previous research. Jeff Hearn stresses that ‘men are structurally and interpersonally dominant in most spheres of life’ (Hearn, 2004, p. 51) and illustrates the relation between political rhetoric and masculinity, by stating that historically, ‘political performance has been one of the most obvious ways for men to show masculinity and “machismo”’ (Hearn, 1987, p. 10). Hence, after centuries of male dominance in politics, politicians need to reproduce in their personal discourse self-representations of the archetype of a politician who is sufficiently masculine. This is confirmed by Aalberg and
Jenssen (2007) who found that the electorate (especially men) sees male politicians as more knowledgeable, trustworthy, and convincing than the female politician. In addition, Rosenwasser and Dean (1989) indicated that voters regard political roles as masculine and confirmed that they prefer male to female candidates. Huddy and Terkildsen (1993) showed evidence that candidates with male-typical traits are preferred, while Dittmar (2015) argued that election campaign teams utilize gender stereotypes for the promotion of male candidates as masculinity gives additional value to candidates running for elite offices. Fahey (2007) examined the ways in which masculinity operates in political campaigns, describing how George W. Bush tried to feminize his rival John Kerry rendering him less attractive to the American voters. Similarly, Khan and Blair (2013) described how the patriarchal figure of Bill Clinton acted in benefit of Barack Obama, instead of supporting Hillary Clinton’s candidacy for the Democratic Party’s nomination in the 2008 presidential elections. Brassett and Clarke (2012, p. 5) the reproduction of tropes of urgency, immediacy and muscularity were mobilized through metaphors of catastrophe and disaster legitimatized unpopular economic policies.

Besides dominant gender representations related to the gender of a politician, political discourse may also contain gender stereotypes which are used in order to support of political arguments and decisions. Messerschmidt (2010) illustrated how various types of masculinity were camouflaged in the political rhetoric of both Bush presidents in each of their wars against Iraq. According to Messerschmidt, hegemonic masculinity and emphasized femininity served as means for discursive justification of the wars against Hussein’s regime and acted in favour of the presidents’ will to initiate a war crisis.

Furthermore, in the field of economy, Griffin (2010) and Peterson (2005) discussed how the global economy has been gendered in androcentric terms by various intergovernmental organizations, where terms such as ‘reason’, ‘economic man’, ‘breadwinner’ and the ‘public sphere’ are placed under the umbrella of masculinity. Prata (2017) found an invisibility of women and gender in parliamentary discourse during the Portuguese economic crisis 2008–2014. Furthermore, Griffin (2013) underscored that neo-liberal discourse is associated with hyper-masculinity discourse based mainly on efficiency and economic aggressiveness. Connell (1998) named this emerging hegemonic form of masculinity in the contemporary global economy, ‘transnational business masculinity’.

While there are several studies seeing Greece’s economic crisis through gender lenses (Athanasiou, 2014; Carastathis, 2015; Kontos et al., 2017; Stratigaki, 2017; Van Vossole, 2016), we did not encounter any research examining the political rhetoric regarding austerity as tropes of use of dominant gender representations and hegemonic masculinity as well as their implications. This article fills this gap by empirically examining the austerity discourse in the Greek context. In addition, its theoretical contribution lies in analysing gender-based discourses and their relevant subject positions as components of the crisis-austerity discourse and dimensions of hegemonic masculinity.

**Theoretical framework**

Aboim, Hearn, and Howson (2016, p. 1) explained that hegemonic masculinity is a component concept within a theoretical model of multiple masculinities or masculinities theory operating within the critical studies of men. As with the plethora of concepts, there is no consensus on a specific and unambiguous definition of masculinity. Taking
this into consideration Connell (2005, p. 71) attempted to define masculinity: ‘to the extend the term can be briefly defined at all, is simultaneously a place in gender relations, the practices through which men and women engage that place in gender, and the effects of these practices in bodily experience, personality and culture’.

By Connell’s definition, it is understood that there is not only one form of masculinity practices that can be named ‘masculinity’, be applied universally and in all historical moments; rather, there are various forms of masculinity practices. A combination of these forms of masculinity practices has a dominant place in a certain part of history and in a certain cultural frame. This latter concept is what is called ‘hegemonic masculinity’, which as the hegemonic discourse is dominant and normalized-naturalized. Furthermore, relating to discourse theory, hegemonic masculinity is not a fixed character type, and it is countered by other forms of masculinity practices which continually challenge it during a discursive struggle. Thus, hegemonic masculinity represents an empty signifier which is filled with different meanings during different periods. This incorporates poststructuralist imperatives regarding the absence of fixed character types, stressing also that hegemony is an integral part in gender relations (Howson, 2009, p. 8). As noted by Connell:

Hegemonic masculinity can be defined as the configuration of gender practice which embodies the currently accepted answer to the problem of the legitimacy of patriarchy which guarantees (or is taken to guarantee) the dominant position of men and the subordination of women [...]. Within the overall framework there are specific gender relations of dominance and subordination between groups of men. (Connell, 2005, pp. 77, 78)

Methodology and material

This article draws on poststructuralism, departing from ontological and epistemological assumptions that social reality – the world we live in – is created through language (Jörgensen & Phillips, 2002). As succinctly put by Hansen (2006, p. 15), ‘Language is social and political, an inherently unstable system of signs that generate meaning through a simultaneous construction of identity and difference.’ Through language – communication – an understanding of the world – of social reality – is created, and, as a result, reality is changeable, not fixed. The article relates to social constructivism, in terms of stressing that there is no objective reality that can be reached outside our own perceptions.

To answer the research questions, which discourses constitute the rhetoric of Greek elite politicians regarding economic policies during the crisis, and which hegemonic concepts of masculinity and femininity do Greek elite politicians elaborate upon and discursively position themselves in, the article applies a methodological approach that derives from poststructuralism, namely discourse analysis, which allows us to conceptualize language as key in understanding social reality. In particular, the article follows the approach of Laclau and Mouffe (1985), focusing on the concepts of ‘chains of equivalence’, ‘signs’, ‘nodal points’, and ‘subject positions.’ Chains of equivalence are conceptualized as the connections of signs, which within their particular discourse create meaning by revealing central themes of the discourse – nodal points (Laclau & Mouffe, 1985). In particular, the article chisels out key subject positions within these nodal points. For Laclau and Mouffe, subject positions are de-centred and in need of political articulations:
Whenever we use the category of ‘subject’ in this text, we will do so in the sense of ‘subject positions’ within a discursive structure. Subjects cannot, therefore, be the origin of social relations – not even in the limited sense of being endowed with powers that render an experience possible – as all ‘experience’ depends on precise discursive conditions of possibility. (Laclau & Mouffe, 1985, p. 115)

For Laclau and Mouffe (1985), a subject is merely a subject position within the discourse; the subject is fragmented and plural and can employ many subject positions, or identities, within different discourses. Hence, the ways in which the subject talks define reality and position the subject in relation to the constructed reality; the various discourses, in turn, define the subject and place it in positions inside the different discourses (Laclau & Mouffe, 1985).

Laclau and Mouffe’s approach to discourse analysis does not elaborate on the issue of agency and discourse and the level of freedom the individual has to constitute the latter. For this issue, we follow Leipold and Winkel’s (2017) reasoning on the dialectical relation the subject has to discourse that both are mutually constituted. Leipold and Winkel’s (2017, p. 524) define discursive agency as the actors’ ability to position themselves as the appropriate agents in a particular discourse by receiving a particular convenient subject position within this discourse and by following specific strategic practices. Leipold and Winkel (2017, p. 525) conceptualize strategic practices as being dialectically constituted by the pool of available discourses on one side and the scope for discursive agency that unfolds in this frame on the other. In a similar vein, Mark Wheeler (2013) conceptualizes different types of agency, such as celebrity politics, which have become centrifugal forces for public engagement.

For this article, we see elite politicians as agents in terms of acquiring subject positions related to hegemonic concepts of masculinity, which draws from the various dominant discourses that administrate gender relations and gendered institutions in society. These subject positions can also be used strategically as discursive resources.

Inspired by Laclau and Mouffe, we proceeded in the following way: we first identified the nodal point in the political discourse on austerity measures – crisis. After that, we noted, listed, and grouped all the signs, which are moments in other discourses, according to their relevant discourses. These discourses were defined by investigating the different articulations of signs found in the parliamentary speeches. We also examined the choice of key discourses related to masculinity and the binary chains of equivalences (Howarth & Stavrakakis, 2000) found in these discourses, each one filling with different signs the ‘crisis vs non-crisis’ binarity. Finally, we investigated which subject positions were key in the various discourses and how the politicians were placed within these discourses.

This three-step approach to discourse analysis was conducted on all the speeches, debates, and verbal statements on the topic of austerity measures made inside the plenary of the Greek parliament in 2010–2012, as recorded and transcribed in the Greek language by the parliament’s secretariat. During this period, the parliament legislated a package of austerity measures. The focus relied on transcriptions of speeches given by Prime Ministers and Ministers of Finance as well as the leader of the main opposition party in four crucial parliamentary moments in the years 2011 and 2012 (see data availability statement). The politicians in focus are members of, PASOK (centre-left) and ND (centre-right), which alternated in government from 1974 to 2012. Hence, their
The major discourses in the political speeches

Which discourses constituted the rhetoric of Greek elite politicians regarding economic policies during the crisis? Based on Laclau and Mouffe (1985), we identified one main discourse – on the notion of crisis – and three sub-discourses related to austerity measures: the catastrophe–medical discourse, the military, war–nationalist–heroic discourse, and the family–kin–responsibility discourse. Crisis is considered as a nodal point, a stabilized sign that defines and is defined by other signs. As discussed in the methods section, different discourses give different meanings to the nodal points through a series of equivalent signs, or chain of equivalence. Hence, ‘crisis’ and its binary chain of equivalences are parted from the positive and negative signs that create the chain of equivalences of the sub-discourses (the different discourses that constitute the ‘crisis’ discourse). In other words, the chain of equivalences in the sub-discourses define how ‘crisis’ is framed in parliamentary speeches, and which signs it relates to. By this analytical method, we are able to identify the gendered character of ‘crisis’ – a crisis that is produced and reproduced by its inherent signs which are connected in a complex chain of equivalence where subjects are (re)created and positioned in various gendered ways.

The catastrophe–medical discourse

Greek elite politicians described the economic difficulties and Greece’s debt problem in ‘eschatological’ terms. For them the economic crisis is a catastrophe for the country which could be turned into an absoluto destruction if very specific measures would not be applied both in the state’s economy and in public administration. Prime Minister Lukas Papadimos illustrated very explicitly the cruel reality which would follow if the MPs did not vote ‘correctly’: ‘because of fatal delusion, despondency or wrong decision will lead the country to a catastrophic failure, prolonged misery in a fatal downhill marginalization from Europe and exit from the euro’ (318).³

Greece and its economy are described by the politicians as suffering a serious illness which threatens the existence of the country, foreshadowing deadly outcomes. They discursively frame the economic crisis as a disease. Their diagnosis is that the country’s most important and vital organ – the economy – suffers from this acute illness, which might lead to a Eurozone pandemic. For instance, Evangelos Venizelos, Vice-President and Minister of Economics, informed the parliament about the possibility that: ‘Greece will get into an absolute surveillance; it will go into quarantine because its disease is fiscally infectious’ (1287). For the elite politicians, the austerity measures are the bitter pill which Greece has to take to recuperate.

The military, war–nationalist–heroic discourse

The economic crisis is described as a threat to the country. The situation for the nation and its people is critical as the enemies, the economic speculators and the lenders of the
country as named by the politicians, covet the wealth of the country. Prime Minister Georgios Papandreou dramatically stated that:

but the war I started to give [...] It was a war to save Greece from extinction – I mean the complete disappearance and it is saved. We fought first and foremost with the markets and the speculators. It was our first battle to protect and defend ourselves from their appetites. (266)

In the ‘military, war-nationalist-heroic discourse’, Greece had to mobilize all its national powers to handle the severe economic conditions. For the nation to survive, politicians invoked the mobilization of the national attributes, the national characteristics that are ‘very unique’ in the Greek people, which can be named as ‘Greekness’. Prime Minister Papandreou gave some examples of these national characteristics, which assist to the solution of the crisis and are also worth of fighting for:

We are proud to be Greeks. And we will shout it; not only in Greece, but everywhere. For [...] our history, our environment, our humanity, solidarity, solidarity for the family and friends, our hospitality, gallantry, our pride, militancy, our courage, our ingenuity, our Greek ingenuity which appears and flourishes in all lengths and breadth of the land. (6761)

With this quote adhering to a speech advocating for austerity measure in the economy, the implication is obvious. Those who are not supportive of the new economic measures are also less nationalistic and patriotic, even less Greek.

That time of crisis was described as a tragic and dark period for the country. The magnitude of sacrifices and the powers needed for the salvation are equal to the size of the problem. Minister of Finance Georgios Papakonstantinou stated: ‘Everybody saw who had the political courage (to vote for the measures) and who didn’t’ (6791). Hence, this rough situation demands from the politicians, among other things, personal sacrifices, and political courage to deal with the crisis.

The family–kin–responsibility discourse

A well-established discourse, close to the previous one, is the ‘family, kin-responsibility discourse’. Family is considered to be an important sign of ‘Greekness’; in fact, ethnographers have distinguished familism as one of the most important orientation in Greek life (Loizos & Papataxiarchis, 1991). Greek elite politicians, embodying the identity of the patriarch, are worried about the nation’s name – or image of the family – that has been dishonoured by the economic crisis, something which would also affect the generations to come. Papandreou declared that he is going to restore the name of the Greeks: ‘… working intensively in all directions, to restore the name of our country in the international environment, to restore its image, to restore the country’s credibility’ (5251). As Greece is part of the Mediterranean culture of honour, where family counts as an important value (Mosquera, Manstead, & Fischer, 2002), the quote illustrates how Papandreou is invoking sentiments related to this value.

A very important element of the politicians’ discourse was the word ‘responsibility’. They described the proposed economic measures as ‘draconian’, but they nevertheless advocated for them, as this would be the only responsible and rational solution. As Papakonstantinou stated: ‘Many times these measures, such as the recent ones, are very difficult, are very hard, afflict the Greek family and the Greek citizens, but they are
necessary’ (6791). Thus, for the Minister or Finance, any other proposition or solution is framed as irresponsible or dangerous, which might bring the default of the country and so its catastrophe.

**The subject positions of politicians**

Which hegemonic concepts of masculinity and femininity do Greek elite politicians elaborate upon and discursively position themselves in? In this section, we identify the ways in which the politicians are self-subjectified in terms of dominant masculine and feminine gender representations, by analysing what subject positions emerge in the three sub-discourses (catastrophe–medical discourse, the military, war–nationalist–heroic discourse, and the family–kin–responsibility discourse).

**The politician as a saviour – doctor**

The political rhetoric of the crisis involves signs from the medical discourse to attach the identity of the medical doctor to the elite politicians. The crisis is represented as an illness. In this concept, the politician saviour-doctor obtains the power of the scientific knowledge over the examined sick object. The leader of the opposition Antonios Samaras proposed to Prime Minister Papandreou recommendations for this illness, as both being members of a medical board deciding the treatment for the heavily ill patient. Samaras stated: ‘Since we cannot avoid the (austerity) measures which bring recession, at least we should give some stimulating injections as counterbalance, so that the economic activity can stay alive’ (5286). The doctor in most western societies has been stereotypically related to the male gender. The profession of the medical doctor was one of the last ones to which women entered in an equal manner. Given that this happened quite late, some old gender professional roles are still present. A survey that took place in Greece in 2009 highlighted, despite the overall improvement, the perpetuation of this stereotype. Hearn (1987) argued that stereotypically in the medical professions the leading figure is the man–doctor, and the woman–nurse is the one that executes the orders. Papataxiarchis and Paradellis (1998) mentioned that in Greece professions related stereotypically with women such as nurses are of lower status affecting for instance work conditions and pay. The elite politician, who is also stereotypically a male figure, seeks to cure the sick country. In the Greek language both words ‘Greece’ and ‘country’ are of female grammatical gender. Joane Nagel (1998) and Yuval-Davis (1993) explain how the nation has been constructed of female gender and body. Consequently, the male politician, as a male doctor, is responsible and specialized to heal the sick body of (female) Greece. The elite politician–doctor (Papandreou) was very clear about the treatment: ‘the great changes the country needs. First of all, the painful fiscal sanitization […] with a sustainable and not parasitic growth’ (12286).

In the medical discourse, two dyadic power relationships are invoked. The first is the male over the female, and the second the expertise of the specialized professional doctor over the simple patient. The politician is self-identified as the expert who has the knowledge and the experience to help and cure the problematic economy and country. Venizelos is talking about the ‘innocent and guileless people’ (12876), who must understand
the cause of the implemented policies. In this duality, the citizen is framed as a passive and ignorant actor – who, needs to receive the unpleasant treatment prescribed by the specialized doctor–politician.

**The politician as soldier-gunman, patriot and hero**

In the military, war–nationalist–heroic discourse, political rhetoric creates a war atmosphere. The self-position of the politician is of a man who is ready to throw himself in battle with courage and abnegation, as a true-honoured man positioning himself in the chain of equivalence of ‘non-crisis’, in contrast to politicians who are afraid to ‘participate in the battle’, in other words to vote for the austerity measures, hence discursively placing them in the chain of equivalence of ‘crisis’. In this way, MPs who oppose the recommended economic policy receive a negative feminized image (afraid to battle) while elite politicians are enforced with masculine attributes of gallantry and braveness. The strong, almost consubstantial relation between manhood and the military, going back to antiquity and continuing until today (Connell, 2005; Hearn, 1992), shows strong connection of this relationship. Connell (2005, p. 246) stated that men ‘have near total control of coercive institutions (military, police) and control of the means of violence (weapons, military training)’. Even though women are accepted now in the professional military, and homosexuals are also accepted or not explicitly disallowed (as it happens in Greece), this has rather legalized the hegemonic principle of manliness and military than changing it (Yuval-Davis, 1993). Concluding from the above, a war situation or a country at war is clearly a men’s arena. Venizelos called for a ‘national enlistment’ to solve the problem and confront the threat the crisis created. In this spirit, Papandreou impeached the opposition and his rival Samaras that they have deserted the battle for the country’s salvation: ‘If you don’t take your responsibilities the conclusions will be easy. You were irresponsible as a government you are again irresponsible as opposition; you deserted as government you deserted as opposition’ (6761). The opposition returned the accusation, with Samaras answering that it was Papandreou that deserted, considering that Papandreou ‘blackmailed’ (5287) the parliament and the electorate for snap national elections. Hence, the identity of the good soldier struggling to defend and serve his country was constructed in the debate by contrasting it with those deserting the battle. These identities were each one constructed in the binary chain of equivalence of ‘crisis vs non-crisis’.

Additionally, in this sub-discourse lies the identity of the ‘rational and ready to fight gunmen’ who knows when to use their weapons. Papakonstantinou compared the European Financial Stability Facility (EFSF) to a weapon, which politicians should have on the table and should be ready to use in the right moment: ‘I have described it (EFSF) many times as loaded gun that we need to have it. We hope that we will never use it, but it should stay on the table’ (5252). Connell (2005) stated that it may be a cliché that the gun is a penis-symbol, as well as a weapon, but it also describes the well-established relationship between hegemonic masculinity and violence in western culture. Another example of a belligerent discourse related to the EU and one of its member states has been discussed by Higgins (2020) who demonstrated how historical incidents related to WW2 were operationalized by the advocates of Brexit in order to support an anti-EU rhetoric.
The military, war–nationalist discourse gives the opportunity for the creation of a masculine and courageous profile. Again, the politicians who disagreed and did not support the austerity measures were described by contrast as less patriotic or even traitors. Joane Nagel (1998, p. 252) argues that ‘patriotism is a siren call that few men can resist, particularly in the midst of a political crisis’. It can be assumed that the same happens in an economic crisis inducing a political one. There is a dichotomy of identities constructed in the elite politicians’ speeches: on the one side there is the real patriot who is aware of his responsibilities and will stick to them by supporting austerity measures. On the opposite side are those being indifferent to country’s interests, acting in an irresponsible and populist way. Papandreou stated that ‘One thing I want to say: The real patriotism today is to do whatever possible to deter Greece’s default’ (6760). ‘But it is a patriotic duty that we all should serve this system (the new taxation system). It is a patriotic duty to stop tax evasion’ (329). Papadimos called the MPs to vote with a sense of ‘high national responsibility’ (318), to save Greece from ‘national isolation and national desperation’ (328). Consequently, the nationalist discourse implies that the MPs who choose not to vote for austerity measures will be considered irresponsible towards their patria. They will abandon their country by not defending its ‘national interest’ (12880) with this resulting in it becoming a ‘real protectorate’ (12877).

Furthermore, in the military, war–nationalist–heroic discourse, the elite politician is self-accredited with superhuman elements, placing himself under the frame of heroism. The politicians who support the austerity measures – even if they sometimes disagree with them – feel confident that they have the power and the will to save the country and its people from the ‘darkness’ (312) the crisis brings and to help the country be ‘reborn from its ashes’ (313). By contrast, the anti-austerity politicians are constructed as being less vigorous and less courageous men for not supporting the difficult but necessary austerity policies. Connell (2005, p. 213) reminds us that, ‘the figure of the hero is central to the Western cultural imagery of masculinity’. Ancient Greece’s mythology is packed with a plethora of various heroic male figures (see Foxhall & Salmon, 2011). Modern Greek national identity has been constructed with many references to the ancient Greek culture. Wenzl (2004) mentioned that the narrative emerging out of crises is that of the rise of heroes, who are considered to be individuals able to inverse a rough situation. The elite politicians stated that they had to be engaged in an enormous-titanic battle, a real feat to save the country. They had to give a superhuman effort for this battle and undergo – alongside the people – great sacrifices. They reassured both the MPs and the Greek people that they would not break, and they would bear the weight of the battle and the cost of needed changes, even if this would mean personal sacrifices to help the country. Papandreou stated,

as Prime Minister, I held for two years a burden that it wasn’t mine. I ignored the political cost, dear colleagues, I ignored the insults, I ignored the threats and the blackmails […] But I know that whatever I suffered, whatever we suffered, is nothing compared to what the people will suffer if we, the politicians, don’t take the right decisions. (276)

Papandreou created almost an image of a hero-martyr, as he was ready to sacrifice himself for the common good. He also stated that the politicians of his government and the people ‘bear a real cross’ (12880), alongside the financial and administrative sins of earlier decades. In the same vein, Papakonstantinou mentioned that the
government and the common people had to ‘follow a difficult marathon’, ‘a Calvary in dark times’ (6763, 5301). The ‘santification’ and ‘heroizaion’ of the politician in the political discourse creates another heroic subject position for the elite politicians. The politicians are ready to suffer and to make personal sacrifices for the sake of the country and the common good. They want to protect the powerless people and lift the injustices and inequalities from the society. As stated by Venizelos: ‘Do you think that we don’t know that we have to keep our minds on the needy, the poor, on the man that is in a situation of total pauperization, on the helpless, on the unemployed, on the disabled, on the single parent family?’ (12985). Another subject position is the politician as a hero-pioneer, full of capabilities, who is aware of his goals and determined to accomplish them. His efforts are a feat; from the sacrifices he makes to the transformations he is applying on the society. He is ready to implement radical ‘incisions’ on the society and transform everything with dashing-bold reforms to eventually pave new roads and give vision and hope. This political activity is connected to the politicians feeling that their choices and actions have a historical value and – as all the important men – they go through ‘history’s final judgment’ (12986).

The politician as a father and rational, responsible man

In the family, kin–responsibility discourse lies the figure of the politician as father, protector, rational, and responsible man. It has common signs with previous discourses and particularly with the nationalist one, as nation is related to ‘πατρίδα-patria’, literary meaning the land of the fathers. In the political debate, elements which are closer to the notion of family and kinship are used, constructing elite politicians as the fathers of the nation. In this subject position, the image of the good father is constructed: the father who protects the family, cares about his children and looks even after the coming generations. Gender theory defines patriarchy, literally the rule of the father, as an oppressive system of power relationships of men to women, integrated in all structures of society (Connell, 2005). This system of oppressive power is supported at state level from various masculinized and homo-social institutions (Nagel, 1998). Parliament has been historically a masculinized institution. Especially, the Greek parliament and governments are homo-social institutions considering that historically the percentage of women has been significantly low. In this frame and by linking the nation with a big family, the role of the father of the nation is attributed to the politician. The Greek word ‘εθνοπατέρας-ethnopateras’ meaning ‘the father of the nation’ is sometimes used for the MPs. Hence, the elite politicians can be considered as the most important of the nation’s fathers and those who have the most dividends but also responsibilities. Nagel (1998) explains how the nation is related to the family, and what is the position of man and woman in this schema: women bear a lot of metaphors and symbolisms as they embody family and national honour; women’s shame is the family’s shame, the nation’s shame, the man’s shame. Men, as the head of the family, are obliged to defend the female and family honour. The elite political discourse during financial crisis is constructed in the same spirit. The ‘responsible father’ subject position is illustrated through a series of symbolisms where the elite politicians are the protectors of the family, consisting of the children-people and the wife-Greece. He wants to put the household – which the ‘naughty wife’ has in a mess – back in order. He wants to
restore the name of the family, which his wife has dishonoured in the European village.
Papakonstantinou stated: ‘We have to convince them (the European partners) that we do also put order in our house’. ‘[…] they have decided to be tough against a country which systematically doesn’t do what it promises and lies […] we work intensively in every direction for the restoration of the country’s name in the international environment, for the restoration of the country’s prestige and credibility’ (6735, 5251).

In family, kin-responsibility discourse, the subject position of the ‘rational father’ who dares to undertake responsibilities and to be sincere about the difficult reality is constructed. The rationality discourse suggests that in the period of economic crisis, reason suggests austerity with this implying that every politician who has another opinion in dealing with the crisis, receives the attributes of irrationality and irresponsibility.

Rationality is identified historically and culturally with masculinity, designating the dichotomy of the rational man vs. the emotional woman (Connell, 2005; Seidler, 2003). This male-related attribute has justified the ideological and institutional power of the ‘masculine’ over the ‘feminine’ in the sense that a man can take responsibilities and make the best choices using his rational capabilities, which a woman does not possess. Furthermore, Griffin (2013, 2015) argued that there is an intricate and intimate relationship between masculinities, responsibility, and global finance, as the global economy is a hyper-masculine capitalism. The rational discourse, which lies in the political discourse of the elite politicians, comes as the voice of reason in a crisis condition, in contradiction to the prodigal and irresponsible actions of the past that brought the crisis; ‘the jokes are over’ (12288) as Papandreou said, invoking responsibility and sobriety. The elite politicians proposed draconian laws and tough but ‘necessary’ measures, as a solution to Greece’s economic problems. Venizelos had trust in his colleagues’ rationality and common sense, which he called upon to persuade the MPs (mainly) of the opposition for the necessity of the proposed economic policies: ‘We are not alone. Because I am sure that the colleagues of the opposition always at the end are possessed by the sense of duty and the power of truth; in other words, the power of reality; the power of common sense is irresistible’ (12985). The family, kin–responsibility discourse entailed that Greece, at this period of crisis, needed a rational man, a manager to provide practical solutions to the economic problems.

**Discussion**

**A ‘patchwork of elite masculinities’**

The analysis examined the different types of subject positions of elite politicians within the crisis discourse and uncovered a variety of masculinity identifications. This concurs with Connell’s (2005) argument that there is not such a thing as one form of masculinity practice, but several and each one is taking a different position in the normative hierarchy of the ‘hegemonic masculinity’. Mike Donaldson (1993) framed ‘hegemonic masculinity’ as an idealized form, which is exclusive, anxiety-provoking, internally and hierarchically differentiated, brutal, and violent. It is pseudo-natural, tough, contradictory, crisis-prone, rich, and socially sustained via heterosexuality and homophobia. The political rhetoric of the Greek elite politicians combines elements of masculinity related to Donaldson’s definition, closely related to hegemonic masculinity. The patchwork of subject positions
tailors the suit of the hyper-masculine politician whom people can trust and adhere to during a crisis: the male doctor who cures the sick country; the jingo soldier-gunman, patriot, and hero who is ready to defend and save his country; the father who is sweet, protective and a leader; and the responsible-rational man aware of the appropriate and suitable actions needed to lead to the problem’s solution. Most of these identities are also stereotypically linked to hetero-normativity and to male dominated institutions (Green, 1998). What is more, the discourses do not only enable subject positions, by making subject positions available they also offer a discursive resource that men strategically can draw upon to practice ‘valorized’ masculinities that intersect with other dominant discourses (such as nationalism) and consolidate their dominant position in society.

**Hegemonic austerity and hegemonic masculinity**

During Greece’s first years of economic crisis politicians, Prime Ministers and Ministers of Finance proposed and advocated for historically hard austerity measures, which significantly reduced the income of Greek citizens. The possible electoral costs for these politicians and their parties were anticipated. The crisis discourse dominated people’s everyday life. The construction of hegemonic masculinity in the political rhetoric amplified the need of these austerity measures and their effectiveness on the crisis, creating also, an image of a powerful and astute man whom people can and should trust. Thus, these subject positions, modules of hegemonic masculinity and constructed as part of the solution to the crisis, functioned as discursive space in which the promotion and justification of a political and economic agenda could be articulated, as well as a discursive resource to be strategically used in favour of austerity politics.

The doctor–politician ‘medicalizes’ the economic problem and transforms the country and its people to patients that need the acute therapy of austerity or the diet of the austerity. In the field of psychology, the claim that panic is a ‘woman’s problem’ has been medically institutionalized. Also, ‘hysteria’, a word denoting loss of self-control, was for centuries related only to women (Olstead & Bischoping, 2012). This implies that during a period of crisis, a man is seen as more trusted and more able to overcome the difficulties than a woman who is considered to be unable to remain calm to steer a country in crisis.

The soldier-gunman, the patriot and the hero are identities convenient for politicians to bear, especially during a period described by a catastrophic discourse, rendering them competent to fight against all possible enemies impinging the country. This condition stipulates a sense of fear and hopelessness to the people seeking eventually for protection and guidance from a strong man or from a hero that will save them.

The identity of the father is symbolically strong in a patriarchal society, as the Greek one. The father is regarded as the pillar of the Greek family, the one who still has the identity of the breadwinner and protector of the family. This paternal figure adopted by the elite politicians gives them extra credits and extra rights for the decisions that need to be taken in times of crisis. Donaldson (1993) contested Connell’s argument that fatherhood is included in the hegemonic masculinity concept because caring for and protecting children are related stereotypically to femininity. However, in the relationship between citizens and politicians, both scholars’ approaches might find a place. This is reflected on how Barak Obama embodied a family man role which was accompanied with ‘a tough guy’ image in order to reach a wider voting contingent since connotations of a soft
father were seen as inappropriate for public office (Smith, 2016). In the Greek case, the political rhetoric is referred to the protection of citizens, but at the same time the same rhetoric treats them as inexperienced and ignorant children who need the guidance of the father. This is especially true for crisis discourse which contains an abundance of economic and financial jargon only economists would understand. In this context, the identity of the rational and responsible man capable of handling a crisis supports the construction of politicians as capable. Griffin (2013, p. 20) argues that politicians have used the economic crisis as an excuse ‘to blame and to discipline their citizens’. The same technique was applied on the Greek citizens, not only from the Greek politicians but also from some of their European colleague (Van Vossole, 2016). In this context, the people of Greece were perceived as acting irrationally and irresponsibly, which was the reason that created the crisis. Consequently, a rational and responsible politician-banker could be ‘the right man’ for this position. Following this rationale, two bankers were appointed in the government during the first years of the economic crisis first, Loucas Papadimos as Prime Minister (in 2011), and later Yiannis Stournaras as Minister of Finance (in 2012).

Conclusions

This article has examined the construction of hegemonic concepts of masculinity and femininity in Greek political discourse, by analysing minutes from the Greek Parliament at the height of the economic crisis in 2010–2012. Based on Connell’s concept of hegemonic masculinity and the application of a discursive approach inspired by Laclau and Mouffe (1985), the article has analysed which discourses constituted the rhetoric of Greek elite politicians regarding economic policies and which hegemonic concepts of masculinity and femininity Greek elite politicians elaborated upon and discursively position themselves. In this final section, we will reflect on the implications of the gendered speeches of these elite politicians.

The crisis discourses and the politicians’ multi-identities

The analysis showed that the elite politicians presented the economic situation of Greece and the future of the country in cataclysmic and disastrous terms, articulated through a crisis discourse. By analysing its sub-discourses through a gender perspective, we identified hegemonic concepts of masculinity and femininity articulated by the Greek elite politicians. Furthermore, we examined how they were discursively positioned vis a vis these hegemonic concepts by identifying the subject positions of the politicians. Each one of these identities is carrying a different form of masculine gender norm related to power, violence, virility, responsibility, and authority. The analysis showed that a synthesis of these subject positions gives the politician a hyper-masculine image attributed to the dominant concept of masculinity, the hegemonic one.

The practicality of hegemonic masculinity in the political discourse

The adopted austerity measures during the crisis rendered the elite politicians unpopular to their electorate. On one hand, by invoking normative images of masculinity, the power and authority deriving from these images were employed in politicians’ articulations.
On the other hand, by employing this authority, a product of hegemonic masculinity, added legitimacy was acquired for the implementation of unpopular economic policies. It seems that despite legal provisions for gender equality in Western countries, the ‘masculine’ continues to be symbolically more legitimized in decision-making than the ‘feminine’ (Giannini & Minervini, 2017). The different masculine and feminine images conveyed in the speeches were giving various attributes not only to politicians themselves, but also to the country, to the people, and to those politicians who opposed the proposed policies. Elite politicians were placed in the hegemonic centre by creating discursively marginalized and subordinated masculinity practices. Messerschmidt (2010) calls these latter constructions of masculinities as ‘toxic’ ones because the hegemonic centre gives them negative attributes, as in the binary opposition of the Senior Bush-hero-hegemonic masculinity vs Saddam Hussein-villain-toxic masculinity. The country is symbolically linked to femininity and to the woman-mother. This feminization of the country that is weak, fragile and in danger fits conveniently with the hegemonic subject position of the elite politician who knows how to protect her. This know-how is manifested in austerity measures and the decisions made in cooperation, or after negotiations with, the European Commission, the European Central Bank, and the International Monetary Fund (Troika). Similar feminization is also applied on the economy constructed as weak and vulnerable.

Implication of the hegemonic masculinity in the political discourse

The construction of hegemonic masculinity in the speeches of elite politicians in Greece has severe implications for society. We argue that the use of hegemonic masculinity within the crisis discourse, as articulated by the elite politicians, paved the way for the ‘Golden Dawn’ neo-Nazi party to enter the parliament. The elite politicians embodied “ordinary”, traditional, dominant (gendered) identity positions (Lobban et al., 2020, p. 84), common within the discourse of right-wing populists, and answering to the need of the electorate for safety and protection during an abnormal period of crisis. The subject positions (father, doctor, military men), hence, offered voters and sympathizers of Golden Dawn ‘safe identities’ (see Lobban et al., 2020).

Furthermore, being part of the national parliament Golden Dawn was normalized and legitimized as political party. Various scholars have examined and revealed the strong connections masculinity has to nationalism and Nazism (Geden, 2005; Mayer, 2000). Malouta (2017, p. 25) argued that the financial crisis in Greece mobilized an extreme-right ideology in the country supporting homophobia, xenophobia, and anti-Semitism, and which was lying dormant after 1974 and the fall of the junta regime. The new precarious reality for the majority of the Greek population that the crisis created re-introduced the national archetype of Greek male (Malouta, 2017). The political rhetoric during the crisis stepped on this archetype enhancing in that way extreme-right ideology.

The construction of a super-masculine identity as the solution for the country’s problems, contributed to creating a discursive space for a right-populist party that embodies more effectively and originally the ideals of this kind of masculinity. Furthermore, a political discourse that adopts hegemonic masculinity as a premise for the management of the crisis, legitimizes other type of violence; for example, police brutality over protestors and immigrants, violence against women, as well as attacks of neo-Nazis against immigrants and LGBTQI people (Athanasiou, 2014; Carastathis, 2015; Kontos et al., 2017).
The political rhetoric has a hegemonic position in society, influencing the peoples’ way of thinking and the way people see gender roles. Politicians also have the institutional power to influence people’s life through the policies they adopt, for example the measures of austerity that have affected massively the Greek society. Connell and Messerschmidt (2005, p. 841) argued that ‘men can adopt hegemonic masculinity when it is desirable; but the same men can distance themselves strategically from hegemonic masculinity at other moments.’ This article has illustrated what Connell and Messerschmidt (2005) described, namely the ways in which hegemonic forms of masculinity in elite Greek political discourse may facilitate the adoption of unpopular policies with the least possible cost for politicians, but with high cost for the Greek society. The analysis has also showed that by adopting elements of hegemonic masculinity, Greek elite politicians contribute to creating an image of a powerful man to whom citizens should adhere, hence reproducing the male (white and heterosexual) norm.

In sum, this article contributes theoretically to the field of masculinity and discourse analysis by implementing key terms of the Laclau and Mouffe’s (1985) approach in analysing discourses. By this approach we have shown the gendered character of the crisis discourse. Additionally, the article broadens up and adds to the discussion on gendered discourses and economic crises with the empirical analysis of the Greek case. Several scholars (Griffin, 2015; O’Dwyer, 2018) have pointed out the dearth of gender-sensitive analysis in austerity policy making and implementation, rendering this absence of analysis a silent advocate of such policies. Further research is warranted on the ways in which the crisis discourse may affect current political discourse in Greece, including the connections between political ideology and gendered rhetoric.

Notes

1. See ‘Data availability statement’.
2. The politicians’ quotes have been translated from Greek to English by the first author.
3. The number next to the politicians’ quotes refers to the pages in the minutes.
6. Indicative of the political instability is that from 2009–2019 Greece hold six general elections.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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**Data availability statement**

The data that support the findings of this study are available in the website of Hellenic Parliament at https://www.hellenicparliament.gr/Praktika/Synedriaseis-Olomeleias. These data were derived from the following resources available in the public domain:

- 19th June 2011_Discussion for the vote of confidence to the government of G. Papandreou: https://www.hellenicparliament.gr/UserFiles/a08fc2dd-61a9-4a83-b09a-09f4c564609d/es20110619.pdf
- 29th June 2011 (morning – evening) Discussion for the new package of austerity measures: Morning: https://www.hellenicparliament.gr/UserFiles/a08fc2dd-61a9-4a83-b09a-09f4c564609d/es20110629(proi).pdf
  
  Evening:
- https://www.hellenicparliament.gr/UserFiles/a08fc2dd-61a9-4a83-b09a-09f4c564609d/es20110629-30.pdf
- 12th February 2012_Discussion for the 2nd memorandum between the Greek Government and the troika: https://www.hellenicparliament.gr/UserFiles/a08fc2dd-61a9-4a83-b09a-09f4c564609d/es20120212.pdf

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