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THERMALISM IN GREECE: AN OLD CULTURAL HABITUS IN CRISIS

TERMALISMO NA GRÉCIA: UM HÁBITO CULTURAL ANTIGO EM CRISE

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines thermalism in Greece both in its historical development and in the context of current challenges engendered by economic recession. The authors' intention is to discuss bathing in thermal springs as a sociocultural practice deeply rooted in history and collective experience (Erfurt-Cooper & Cooper, 2009), to follow its transformations in the course of time, and to analyze the complexity of its present state. The latter issue, which is dealt with in more detail, is explored through academic literature, the evaluation of quantitative and qualitative data, and empirical research. The last part of the paper discusses the conclusions of our study of the Greek case with a view to contributing to the overall assessment of popular thermalism in Europe.

Keywords: Thermalism, History, Cultural tourism, Development

RESUMO

Este artigo examina o Termalismo na Grécia, tanto em seu desenvolvimento histórico, quanto no contexto dos desafios atuais gerados pela recessão econômica. A intenção dos autores é discutir o banho em nascentes termais como uma prática sociocultural profundamente enraizada na história e na experiência coletiva (Erfurt-Cooper & Cooper, 2009), para acompanhar suas transformações no decorrer do tempo, e para analisar a complexidade de seu estado presente. A última questão, a qual é tratada com maiores detalhes, é explorada através da literatura acadêmica, da avaliação qualitativa e quantitativa de dados e pesquisa empírica. A última deste artigo, discute as conclusões de nosso estudo do caso Grego, visando contribuir de forma geral para avaliação do termalismo popular na Europa.

Palavras-chave: Termalismo, História, Turismo Cultural, Desenvolvimento

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INTRODUCTION

The transformations of bathing in thermal springs from Antiquity to modern times

Bathing in thermal springs was a common practice in ancient Greece and Rome. Greeks and –especially– Romans turned many thermal springs into centres of worship for Asclepius (Aesculapius), the god of medicine and healing, and the Nymphs. Bathing in the springs was part of the cultic practices aiming at providing cure to the ailing who visited the shrines. Under the Romans, some thermal bath establishments, such as the one at Baiae in Campania which evolved in a large complex patronized by the emperors, became holiday centres for the wealthy and were famous for their hedonistic atmosphere (Yegül, 1992, pp. 93ff).

The use of thermal springs was embedded in Greek and Roman bathing culture. Bathing facilities were included in the Greek gymnasia and the Roman palestrae, the public venues in which physical exercise was combined with civic education for athletes and the male youths of the wealthier classes. At the same time, public bathing in state-sponsored or private establishments, such as the Greek balaneia or the Roman thermae and balneae, was a part of everyday urban life and was associated with pleasure, well-being, and particular forms of sociability (Lucore & Trümper, 2012). According to Fikret Yegül (1992, p. 30), it would be no exaggeration to say that “at the height of the empire, the baths embodied the ideal Roman way of urban life”.

The rise of Christianity disrupted this tradition, with bathing becoming an ambivalent practice: taking care of one’s body was treated as a sign of neglecting one’s spiritual duties. Although the use of public baths continued to be regarded as a feature of “civilized life”, it

decreased from the 7th century onwards in tandem with the decline of the Roman Empire’s urban culture. As concerns thermal springs, bathing in them continued during the Middle Ages due to their healing properties and with the permission of the Church (Yegül, 1992, pp. 314ff.; Berger, 2011). The springs that were linked to pagan cults were “Christianized” and became associated with the cult of Archangel Michael or with miraculous events. In Aachen, for example, the activities of the Frank kings Pepin the Short and Charlemagne were thought to have driven away the demon who had haunted the thermal baths (Howe, 1997, p. 75).

In Greece and Southeastern Europe, bathing regained its relevance for religious practice and entered again into everyday urban culture under the rule of the Muslim Ottoman Empire. In the Islamic tradition, physical cleanliness is a means for the purification of the believers’ body and soul. Public bathing had a central role in the Caliphate, starting with Umayyad Syria, where the religious precepts, combined with the Roman bathing tradition, led to the proliferation of bath establishments (Tohme, 2011). Among the numerous hammams that were founded in the Ottoman lands under the patronage of the sultan or of high-ranking officials there were thermal bathing establishments, not only in big cities like Bursa, Buda and Sofia (Peychev, 2015), but also in smaller places. Sultans went to thermal baths to find healing, as in the case of Süleyman the Magnificent (1520-1566) who, according to the Ottoman traveller Evliya Çelebi, was healed from his rheumatism in the thermal baths of Aytos in today’s southeastern Bulgaria (Kiel, 2011).

Thermalism in its modern sense emerged in Central and Western Europe in the modern period from the 18th century onwards. The factors that shaped it as a phenomenon were the

rise of a secular culture of physical well-being, cure, and recreation among the aristocratic and bourgeois social strata that were engaged in leisure activities, as well as the development of a scientific discourse and practice in medicine and physical chemistry (Walton, 2014). Spas became centres of a more informal sociability among “respectable” persons of both sexes and were placed somewhere in the middle between the conveniences of urban life and the attractions of the picturesque countryside. Daniel Defoe described the English spa town of Bath in the early 18th century as “the resort of the sound, rather than the sick”. Bathing, he added, had become “more a sport and diversion, than a physical prescription of health” (Borsay, 2014, p. 46).

In the next centuries, the recreational and medicinal functions of thermal centres coexisted in a “permanent symbiosis of tension” (Weisz, 2011, p. 138). Thermalism became a widespread phenomenon in late 19th century Western and Central Europe, as shown by the proliferation of spas, some luxurious and others more modest, and provided a favorite setting milieu for fiction. In the 20th century, thermalism was “democratized” through the medicalization of thermal baths and the inclusion of thermal cures in the social welfare services of several European states. France and Germany –from among the non-communist European states– were the main vehicles for this development that led to the unprecedented expansion of thermalism through its transition from a “recreational” to a “social” and subsequently to an “assisted” phase (Naraindas & Bastos, 2011, p. 2; Zollo, Simonetti, Salsano, & Rueda-Armengot, 2015, p. 65).

Thermalism in Greece: From the late 19th century to the apogee of the post-war decades

In modern Greece thermalism developed from the mid-19th century onwards, when the thermal springs of Kythnos, Ypati, Kyllini, Loutra Kaiafa and Loutraki began to be organized and used for therapy treatments and well-being purposes. Most prominent were the springs of Loutraki, which attracted the more well-to-do visitors and showed a potential for evolving into a resort according to the model of European spas. Towards the end of the century, the Greek state leased some of the springs to private individuals. However, due to the vagueness of the legal framework and to the lack of consistent development strategies, no worthwhile infrastructure came into being (Vlachos, 2003).

Things changed in the first half of the 20th century: in the 1920s, methods for the scientific analysis of the spring waters were regulated and initiatives were taken for the construction of the necessary infrastructure. The classification of thermal springs in that period indicates their hierarchy as to forms of financial exploitation and socio-economic criteria: the ones that were leased to private enterprises appealed to social strata of higher income, namely the members of the Greek bourgeoisie, while those operated by municipal authorities attracted a clientele from the middle classes; the lower social strata, to the contrary, continued to bathe in thermal springs that were not yet exploited and thus did not dispose of any infrastructure or medical supervision.

An example will suffice: When a hotel and a hydrotherapy centre were opened in Nea Apollonia in the mid-war period, the people who used to bathe in the thermal springs turned to an old “Byzantine” bath some two kilometers away, where the thermal waters spurted from the ground, and bathed there in order to avoid the cost (Lekkas, 1938, p. 21). The old bath, actually

an Ottoman 16th-century building, stands today as a monument of Ottoman bathing culture in a very beautiful but rather neglected place, where the small Ottoman town of Yeni Pazar used to be (Vingopoulou-Papazotou, 1989).

The number of spa visitors rose considerably with time: in the late 1930s the thermal baths attracted a little less than 65,000 persons annually; more than one third of the visitors frequented private establishments, mostly those of Loutraki and Aidipsos. Apart from the bathing facilities, some Greek spa towns developed a set of recreation infrastructures such as cinemas, concert venues, and promenades (Vlachos, 2003; Melios, 2003). For the indigenous travellers of mid-war Greece, a country today associated with “sea, sun, and antiquities” (Kouris, 2009, p. 175), tourism was identified with thermalism (Vlachos, 2015, pp. 28-29).

The difference in the status of thermal establishments was reproduced in the post-war legislation (1954, 1960) that classified thermal springs into two categories, namely the “springs of touristic importance”, which came under the jurisdiction of the Greek National Tourism Organization, and the ones of “local importance”, which fell under the Ministry of the Interior and were exploited by municipal authorities. Thermalism underwent a qualitative and quantitative transformation in the post-war decades, as infrastructure was improved and the exploitation of thermal springs became effectively included within a national plan for tourism development. From 1950 to 1964 the number of visitors in Greek thermal establishments grew from a little more than 100,000 to a little less than 150,000 annually and reached its peak in the mid-1980s (around 170.000). The most important contribution to the rise of the thermalists’ numbers, of course,

was the inclusion of thermal baths in the social insurance system, a fact that put the emphasis rather on curative than on well-being thermalism.

Thermalism in Greece in the late 20th and the early 21th centuries: Shifts in consumption patterns and economic crisis

In the mid-1980s the rise of thermalism came to a halt, which was soon followed by a decline. The number of visitors began to fall until, in the mid-1990s, it had reached the levels of the mid-1960s. The decline was sharper in the category “thermal springs of touristic importance”, a fact that underlined the overall touristic devaluation of thermal establishments (Papageorgiou, 2009, pp. 160ff; Didaskalou, 1999, pp. 111ff).

Apart from other reasons, including the gradual decay of the infrastructure, the decrease was due to a shift in consumption patterns and leisure practices that had started in the 1960s with the emergence of a sun-and-sea bathing culture emphasizing youth, nature, emancipation of the body, and eroticism (Urry, 2002, pp. 35-36; Vlachos, 2003, p. 27). In what concerns thermalism, the shift became perceptible only when those who were young in the '60s and '70s entered middle age. For them, thermal bathing was associated with old age and illness. The rise of visitors in thermal establishments between the 1950s and the mid-1980s had been due to a gradual access to leisure practices and treatment services, but for subsequent generations leisure was more or less a given and treatment was only for the sick. It is indicative that the percentage of thermal visitors in the overall picture of tourism in Greece did not exceed 1% (2% in 1985) from 1981 to 1993 (Didaskalou, 1999, p. 116).

The article by Anido Freire (2013, p. 33) sketches a similar development in French

thermalism. In that case, a major factor for the decline of the number of thermalists were the cuts in social security support, while the medical efficacy of thermal cure was questioned (Weisz, 2001, pp. 480-481). It is, however, very probable that the decline was also due to a widespread association between thermalism and old age.

In Greece, the relative decline in the use of thermal establishments continued in the next decade, although there are no reliable statistical data that could present a comprehensive picture. In the first decade of the 21st century, however, the Greek state re-organized the legal framework (2006) in order to promote new forms of thermal tourism, signaling thus a depart from “classic” balneotherapy (Papageorgiou, 2009, pp. 168ff).

This development coincided with another shift in consumption patterns and practices. A culture of self-fashioning, fitness, and new-age relaxation, well embedded in the post-industrial capitalist service market, emerged among the middle and higher urban social strata throughout Europe. Mass tourism lost its appeal and emphasis was put on personalized touristic products and self-development experiences (Giddens, 2007, pp. 135ff). This led to the rise of wellness tourism, a multi-layered phenomenon closely linked to alternative, holistic and personalized approaches of health and well-being (Voigt, 2014), and affected thermalism as well (Zollo et al., 2015, p. 65).

In Greece, some of the old luxurious establishments in spa towns were renovated (e.g. “Thermai Sylla” in Aidipsos, 1999, “Galini” in Kamena Vourla, 2002) and started offering complete packages of wellness services: anti-ageing, anti-stress, detox, weight-loss programmes etc. As we will see, this trend, which was in accordance to the first appearance of wellness tourism in Greece (Vasileiou & Tsartas,

2009), re-shaped earlier socio-economic cleavages among the visitors of thermal establishments.

The emergence of new thermal services, in combination with an unprecedented diversification of consumerist practices in Greece during the 1990s and the 2000s, led to a new rise in the number of visitors. According to the Greek National Centre for Social Research, from 2005 to 2008 the number of tickets for bathing in thermal establishments all over the country grew from ca. 1,980,000 to ca. 2,323,000 (Greek National Centre for Social Research, 2016).

From 2009, however, the economic and financial crisis, which hit Greece particularly hard, provoked a dramatic decrease: the number of tickets fell from ca. 2,050,000 in 2010 to ca. 1,586,000 in 2011, and then to ca. 880,000 in 2013, 2014, and 2015. In order to evaluate the data and to make comparisons with the previous development of thermalism in Greece (the data for which refer mainly to numbers of visitors and not to numbers of tickets), we must note that the overall number of bathing tickets in the decades of 1961-1970, 1971-1980, and 1981-1990 was ca. 17,000,000, 19,380,000, and 20,900,000 respectively, while in the eleven years between 2005 and 2015 it was not more than 18,065,000 (Papageorgiou, 2009, Appendix of chapter 2, pp. 34-37; Greek National Centre for Social Research, 2016). It is indicative that the number of ca. 880.000 tickets for the years 2013, 2014, and 2015 is substantially lower than the respective number for 1950s, when the tickets per year were more than 1,300,000, and is closer to the levels of the mid- and late 1930s (Papageorgiou, 2009, p. 161).

The economic crisis hit Greek thermalism in a twofold way. On the one hand, the social

insurance funds made substantial cuts in services regarding the number of beneficiaries, the duration of the thermal cure, the access to thermal establishments irrespective of their geographic location, and the list of illnesses and ailments, for which costs were covered. On the other hand, the crisis led to a drop in consumption and to the shrinking of the number of visitors who were not beneficiaries of the social insurance system (Greek National Centre for Social Research, 2016).

It is interesting to note the differences between the several entrepreneurial categories of thermal springs' exploitation. The ones that have been hit more severely were the private enterprises and those run by the central state. As to the latter, their bathing tickets for 2015 represented only 18,6% of the tickets for 2005; as to the first, the fall in bathing tickets between 2005 and 2015 –except for the ones in the spa town of Aidipsos– amounted to ca. 58%. The decrease for the privately held enterprises in Aidipsos was abysmal, amounting to more than 90%! The municipal enterprises were the only ones that were capable of somehow reducing the loss: the fall in the number of their bathing tickets between 2005 and 2015 amounted to ca. 33%. Today, the percentage of their bathing tickets in the Greek thermalism market represents more than 68%.

Apart from lower prices, a reason for the municipal establishments' better position in comparison to state and private enterprises was that some of them were organized as municipal development companies, often funded by public and private capital. Thus, they were more capable of improving the state of infrastructure and of attracting visitors also outside the pool of social insurance beneficiaries, by offering more affordable prices and well-being services in

addition to medical ones. The small but significant rise in the number of visitors in Greek thermal springs in 2016, the first since 2009, is due to the relative success of municipal establishments in re-configuring their thermal services (Greek National Centre for Social Research, 2017).

Thermalism in Greece today: Quantitative and qualitative factors in a period of economic recession

In a series of publications between 2009 and 2011, the urban planner Marilena Papageorgiou analyzed a set of data that were produced by her own fieldwork in Greek spa towns. In the analysis she discerned two main categories of visitors. On the one hand, there were the "classic" visitors of thermal establishments, for the most part aged over 65 years, who visited the baths in order to find cure or relief from a wide variety of illnesses and ailments. A significant number among them belonged to semi-urban and rural social strata of mediocre or low income, and their visits were funded wholly or partly by social insurance. This group's interest in other forms of recreation was limited; most of them, although they spent a significant amount of time in spa towns (more than two weeks), did not look for any participation in excursions in the nearby areas and/or explorations of cultural, religious, or nature tourism.

On the other hand, there was the smaller category of "modern" spa visitors, which represented an almost diametrically opposite social type. With more than a half of them aged below 49 years, this group consisted of people from urban social strata of medium and high income whose visit was rather prompted by a desire for wellness, beauty, relaxation, and self-development. Not surprisingly, many among them were women. Modern visitors lodged

mostly in the renovated and expensive hotels, which offered all-inclusive packages, and confined their visit from a weekend to one week. In comparison to the “traditional” visitors, this group showed a greater interest in other forms of recreation, if available. Consequently, “modern” visitors had the tendency to spread the spatial scope of their activities, even though their stay was substantially shorter, a fact that hindered their participation in other forms of tourism (Papageorgiou & Beriatos, 2011). A similar duality has been observed among Italian thermalists (Zollo et al., 2015, pp. 69ff).

This duality affected the whole scope of the visitors’ relationships with the local society and economy: while “classic” tourists formed closer ties with the local community (e.g. by staying in rented rooms or in low-budget hotels), they could not offer more to the economy, due to their restricted financial situation; on the other side, “modern” spa visitors had a minimal contact with the local community and a minimal contribution to the local economy, because of their limited stay in expensive hotels offering all-inclusive packages (Papageorgiou & Beriatos, 2011).

In consequence, some of the classic spa towns of Greece were presenting a two-sided image: a few hotels were renovated and offered high-priced wellness services, while most other establishments, which aimed at providing strictly medicinal services for middle and lower incomes, could not fund the modernization of their infrastructure; many were in a state of decay. “In Kamena Vourla half of the treatment installations/buildings are completely abandoned while in Ypati the main spa center core is operating in a rather downgraded building construction and several hotels are also empty and nearly ruined” (Beriatos & Papageorgiou,

2008, p. 149). Towns as Aidipsos, Kamena Vourla, and Loutra Ypatis were partly developing into “brownfield sites”, that is, agglomerations of architectural complexes that once housed commercial activities, the shells of which dominate hauntingly the urban environment (Beriatos & Papageorgiou, 2008).

According to the analysis of spatial planning and regional development experts, the way out of this impasse was to opt for a viable combination of both curative and well-being functions of thermalism within an integrated framework of services and infrastructures. The aim would be to attract the whole range of socioeconomic strata (with particular emphasis to middle incomes, which presented a relative gap in the spa towns’ social landscape), to promote and enhance the visitability of the relevant regions’ sites of natural and cultural heritage, and to upgrade the spa towns by re-appropriating historic buildings and facilities. This, they added, “depends on political will and is mainly a task of local authorities [...], which should be mobilized with the support of the central government and the financial contribution of local private investors” (Beriatos & Papageorgiou, 2008, p. 158).

The economic crisis that followed transformed further the socio-economic landscape of thermalism in Greece. The division between “classic” and “modern” spa visitors persists, but their attitudes have changed. The number of “classic” spa visitors has shrunk, due to the cuts in the social security system, while many “modern” spa visitors cannot afford the prices of luxury hotels and turn to establishments that offer well-being services in lower prices in an atmosphere that has neither the downgraded image of popular curative thermalism nor the upper-class pretensions of expensive hotels. This

development is mostly evident in municipal establishments. The Hellenic Association of Municipalities with Thermal Springs (HAMTS), founded in 1983, asserts on its website: “wherever the Greek state put its trust in local authorities, notwithstanding the difficulties caused by the economic crisis in the development of entrepreneurial activity after 2010, the visitability was retained at a certain level” (Hellenic Association of Municipalities with Thermal Springs, 2017).

Impressions from a recent survey

In August 2016, the authors of this paper undertook a survey of thermal establishments in central and northern Greece (Tzedopoulos, Kamara, Lampada, & Ferla, 2016). The survey was organized by the Greek cultural management company Time Heritage within the framework of the Erasmus+ project Cultour Plus (Innovation and Capacity Building in Higher Education for Cultural Management, Hospitality and Sustainable Tourism in European Cultural Routes, 2017).

During the survey we visited the spa town of Kamena Vourla, as well as the municipal thermal establishments of Langadas near Thessaloniki, Nea Apollonia at the shore of lake Volvi, and Krinides near the city of Kavala. At the small town of Langadas we interviewed Mr. Markos Danas, secretary general of the HAMTS.

The survey contributed to a nuanced picture of the relationship between curative and wellness thermalism, as well as of issues of exploitation (private or municipal) and management. The hotel “Galini” in Kamena Vourla, the only one of the historic hotels of the spa town in the 1960s still in operation, belongs to a large tourist company and is orientated to wellness services. It is indicative that, although the hotel does recommend a medical

examination to the customers who intend to use the thermal baths in its premises, it does not have any resident medical staff; the visitors have to look for a private physician. In contrast to the luxurious ambience of the hotel, thermalism in Kamena Vourla is in a state of absolute decline, which corroborates the picture given by the urban planning research in the late 2000s (Papageorgiou, 2009, p. 331). The larger part of the so-called “thermal park”, a complex comprising four hotels and a hydrotherapy centre, has been abandoned; only the hotel “Galini” and the hydrotherapy centre “Hippocrates”, leased to the same tourist company as the hotel, are still in operation.

The thermal establishment of the small town of Langadas is situated some 18 kilometres north from the city of Thessaloniki. Langadas was developed in the mid-war period, when it became a resort place for the bourgeoisie of Thessaloniki. The hotel “Megas Alexandros”, a splendid example of modernist architecture, attests to this past. Today, the site and facilities of the thermal baths are well maintained. The complex includes four indoor pools, two of which are actually renovated Byzantine baths (one dating to the 9th and the other to the 14th century), individual bath-tubs and hydrotherapy massage tubs, and two open swimming pools. Inside the hydrotherapy centre there is a medical station for the examination of the thermalists (Thermal Baths of Langadas, 2017).

The average age of the visitors has become significantly lower in recent years. Cuts in insurance-funded thermalism have led to the decrease of third-age visitors, who used to come for purely therapeutic reasons, and to the dramatic drop of accommodation services in the town of Langadas: of the numerous hotels and rooms-to-let that used to operate, there remains

now only one hotel in a state of decline. The hotel “Megas Alexandros” closed down a few years ago, but the municipal company of the thermal baths is looking for an investor.

On the other hand, some younger visitors are attracted by the wellness and spa services offered; athletic clubs are visiting the facility for fitness recovery and/or maintenance. This has led to the prolongation of the active season beyond the summer months. In a sense, the baths of Langadas are returning to their past as a spa centre for nearby Thessaloniki. In this context, the emphasis is now put in a combination of spa and wellness services (e.g. aromatherapy, jacuzzi) and in a relative detachment from curative thermalism.

The thermal baths at Nea Apollonia by lake Volvi, some 50 kilometres east from Thessaloniki, were also developed in the mid-war period, but present a different picture than those of Langadas, as they are still a centre of curative thermalism. Their clientele consists mainly of third-age persons taking advantage of social tourism programmes. The situation of the facility, not as impressive as that of Langadas, is in relation to the low cost of social tourism services, and the infrastructure is in need of improvement. The facility consists of a small pool and bath-tubs for one or two persons, while a larger pool is planned. There are also rooms for hydro-massage, massage and sauna, and some wellness services are also provided. The latter, however, are rarely sought by the visitors. Lodging is provided in a hotel, “Aristoteles”, and in bungalows situated within the thermal baths complex, while accommodation is also available in the town of Nea Apollonia (mainly rooms-to-let). For the use of the baths the medical examination of the visitors is required, which

takes place in the medical centre located in the premises.

In the last few years, the bathing tickets have been reduced to the half, due to the cuts in social insurance services. Younger visitors are still relatively few, albeit more than in the past, particularly in spring and autumn. There is also a potential for small enterprises in connection to the thermal baths (canoe and kayak rental, bicycle rental, organization of tours in the nearby countryside), but it has not yet been explored. From the thermal baths of Nea Apollonia one can see a complex of bath and lodging facilities that was completed in 1993 but never opened due to reactions and conflicts within the local society and the municipality. Materials and infrastructure are left to ruin and pillage (Volvi Press News, 2016).

Today, the management of the baths is in the hands of a company, the shares of which are divided between the Municipality of Volvi and the Bank of Piraeus, the two partners holding 51% and 49% respectively. The effort to move towards a combination of curative thermalism and wellness services is evident, as shown by the rather pretentious presentation in the baths’ website (Apollonia Spa, 2017), but the transition is not easy.

The last station of the survey was the mud baths near the small town of Krinides in northeastern Greece, some 17 kilometres north of Kavala. The baths are situated a few kilometres away from the archaeological site of ancient Filippi, which has been recently included in UNESCO’s list of World Heritage Monuments (Unesco, 2017). The proximity of the mud baths attracts some tourists to a short visit, all the more so since curative mud treatments are not so well-known and may awake some curiosity. Indeed, the area has a good potential for the

concurrent development of thermal, religious, and cultural-archaeological tourism, given that the ancient city of Filippi was visited by St Paul in his travels and was the seat of one of the first Christian Churches in Europe.

The spa, which is under the supervision of the municipal company “Dimofeleia” of the Municipality of Kavala, is in a very good condition (Mud Baths of Krinides, 2017). The area is functional, welcoming, and well-visited. While the number of visitors has been reduced since 2009, the blow has not been as hard as elsewhere. In the spa complex there is a large mud pool, as well as a hydro-therapy facility in an Ottoman bath that has been restored and renovated, while a gymnastic programme is also offered to the visitors; specialized medical support is provided in the complex. The spa is open from June to October. The municipality has applied for a fund from the Greek National Strategic Reference Framework for the construction of a vaulted roof over the pool, so that the spa can operate all-year round. For the time being, most of the visitors are supported by social tourism programmes, while there are also some wellness tourists. Visitors can lodge either in the municipal camping that operates inside the complex or in one of the hotels nearby.

Some of the reasons for the spa’s relative success in overcoming the impact of the economic crisis is the good cooperation between the municipality, local stakeholders, and the community, the proximity of other touristic attractions, as well as the fact that natural mud baths, due to their scarcity, do not face much competition. Many visitors seem to be well acquainted with the place and to have developed a spirit of community, which is reinforced by the operation of the camping that creates small “neighbourhoods” in the area it occupies. In

general, the spa of Krinides presents a balanced example of popular curative thermalism that is branching out in the direction of wellness tourism, but is also making use of the potential of local and trans-local cooperation. This attitude is evident in the mud baths’ participation in the European Historic Thermal Towns Association, together with only a few other Greek establishments (European Historic Thermal Towns Association, 2017).

The interview with Mr. Danas, secretary general of the HAMTS, revealed two issues that affect directly the current state of thermalism in Greece. The first is the question of certification: according to the Greek law of 2006, all thermal establishments needed to follow certain managerial procedures and quality protocols for getting certified. This was in accordance with the effort for the homogenization of the legal and institutional framework within the European Union. Things were not easy, however, since municipal authorities could not always respond adequately to the complex procedure, and the latter was somewhat simplified by a 2011 ministerial decision. The HAMTS supports member towns all over Greece to compile the dossiers and acquire certification.

The second issue concerns the forms of exploitation. In cases where the municipalities have retained the management of thermal baths and spa facilities, funding continued (even with substantial cuts in services provided) despite the negative effects of the decline of supported thermalism. Local authorities, however, are not always quick to adapt to changing conditions, and changes on the political level may affect the management and the sustainability of the thermal establishments. The HAMTS helps municipalities set up business plans and acquire funding by European Union programmes and by

the Greek National Strategic Reference Framework (which is co-funded by the European Union), in order to expand the range of offered services.

The survey confirmed the analysis of spatial planning and regional development experts as to the difficulty in combining “traditional” thermalism and wellness services, the re-appropriation of historic buildings, the integration of thermalism in regional action plans on cultural tourism, and the cooperation between local authorities, the central government, and the private sector. The survey revealed the importance of two additional and complementary factors: social interaction and engagement on the local level, on the one hand (Erfurt-Cooper & Cooper, 2009, pp. 231-232), and international clusters and networks, on the other. The latter refers to the inclusion of Greek thermal centres in European cultural routes that enhance visibility, integration, and added value, and their participation in European cooperation networks as concerns funding, institutional homogenization, and common goals. Organizations such as the European Historic Thermal Towns Association can put pressure for the effective engagement of public authorities on all administration levels, even at a time when social state services are shrinking all over Europe. This is of particular importance: the “golden ages” in the history of thermal bathing are closely related to the active involvement of the state.

For a re-conceptualization of popular thermalism

It seems that the European model of supported thermalism is irretrievably gone. The countries, capitalist and communist alike, that in the postwar decades included thermalism in their social security and health care services are following –or have already followed– the same

path: “with the collapse of state socialism in the East, and the shrinking of the welfare state in the West, the spa was re-invented as a wellness destination”, a development that has alienated the “classic” spa visitors culturally and economically (Naraindas & Bastos, 2011, p. 3). At the same time, “medical science provided a host of therapies that worked more quickly and consistently (although not necessarily more cheaply) than did mineral waters”. The shift in medical science towards a clinical approach as to therapy treatment has put the curative efficacy of thermal springs into doubt (Weisz, 2011, p. 142).

The difficult co-existence between curative and wellness thermalism leads to the widening of the gap between the two and between the social groups they focus on. At the same time, the clinicalisation of health care exiles a large part of –particularly elderly– Europeans to the unfriendly territory of the ubiquitous pill. These are developments that emphasize and consolidate differences and inequalities as regards to economic position, age, and sociocultural identity. What is more, the development of thermalism into an over-commercialized product not only affects its popular character but also endangers its overall importance as an economic sector. The success of the “Galini” luxurious establishment in Kamena Vourla cannot compensate for the decline of the old spa centre and for the losses sustained by the local economy, exactly as the efforts of Czech spas to attract wealthy Germans cannot compensate for the loss of the Czech visitors who used to frequent the facilities in large numbers (Speier, 2011). Russia displays an even more accentuated trend in this direction, since most health and wellness centres follow the model of “beauty therapy” and spas are

widely regarded as “expensive and elite” (Erfurt-Cooper & Cooper, 2009, p. 254).

In the words of the historian George Weisz (2011, p. 141), “it is always nice to be reminded that private enterprise has its limitations and state intervention its uses”. Intervention in which direction, however? The German model, for instance, which combines supported thermalism (even with serious cuts in comparison to the past) with curative pluralism (Naraindas, 2011), is quite different to the French tradition, where “medicalized thermalism [was] almost entirely dependent on government funding, with all the uncertainty that entails” (Weisz, 2001, p. 480). The analysis of thermalism in crisis-stricken Greece may help us identify meaningful pathways towards a new European popular thermalism.

As we have seen, the thermal establishments that were most successful in arresting losses during the current recession are the municipal enterprises, which have tried –albeit not always with success– to combine curative thermalism with wellness services. Cases like the mud baths of Krinides display a potential for moving towards a new paradigm of popular thermalism: first, they have not alienated their traditional clientele; secondly, they capitalize on their vast expertise in all things thermal; thirdly, they cultivate a sense of belonging in regard both to their visitors and to the local society; fourthly, instead of just “selling” a product, they draw on the historical and cultural identity of thermalism as a healing process open to all, young and old, ailing and healthy, an approach that cuts across curative and wellness thermalism. After all, the popularity –and the economic impact– of curative thermalism has always depended on its potential for social interaction, community formation, and psychological welfare.

The next step is the cooperation, network formation, and cluster building on multiple levels and among multiple stakeholders. The role of public institutions in this process remains crucial, not only for monitoring activities but also for supervising and planning. In order for popular thermalism to re-invent its sociocultural and economic importance, it has to become the target of integration policies in the framework of the European Union. An engaged cooperation process between public authorities (local, regional, national and central), national and European associations of thermal springs and spas, entrepreneurship, and local societies could lay the foundations for the planning and regulating of public and private funding; for the symbiosis and the blending of curative and wellness thermalism; for embedding thermalism in the health systems of European states; for setting the standards for the effective management and sustainability of spas; for promoting a fair and productive specialization of capabilities among spas; for ensuring affordable prices for most Europeans; and for the further development of thermalism in connection with other forms of recreation and leisure, like cultural and alternative tourism.

Bathing in thermal springs is a sociocultural habitus and an economic activity deeply rooted in European collective experience. Its long history shows clearly its relation to social identity and interaction, as well as its potential for offering relief and enjoyment. In a European context of threatening socioeconomic inequality, anxiety, and intellectual tristesse, these factors are not to be underestimated. A new and sustainable popular thermalism can contribute to –and receive feedback from– social well-being (Keyes, 1998).

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