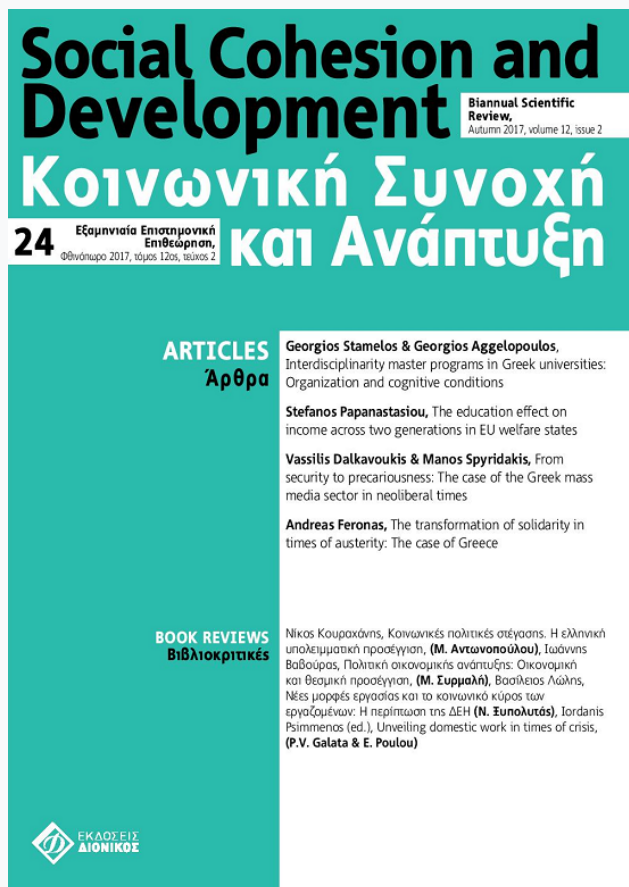


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From security to precariousness: The case of the Greek mass media sector in neoliberal times

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Από την ασφάλεια στην επισφάλεια: Η περίπτωση του κλάδου των Ελληνικών ΜΜΕ σε νεοφιλελεύθερους καιρούς

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ABSTRACT

The paper focuses on the way ex-mass media employees experienced a dramatic passage from safe employment to a precarious condition. It is based on fourteen months ethnographic research (August 2012 to October 2013) in the closing premises of the ALTER TV Channel. In addition, fifteen semi-structured interviews were conducted with employees. In the concluding remarks a new type of working subject is questioned through a) the 'reinvention' of forgotten economic processes, b) the motivation of any social network to cope with precariousness and c) the critique of the so called 'old fashioned' syndicalism.

KEY WORDS: Greece, neoliberal times, crisis, mass media sector, precariousness, alternative economic processes, social networks, 'old fashioned' syndicalism.

ΠΕΡΙΛΗΨΗ

Το άρθρο εστιάζει στον τρόπο με τον οποίο πρώην εργαζόμενοι στα Μέσα Μαζικής Ενημέρωσης βίωσαν το πέρασμα από μια ασφαλή εργασιακή σχέση στην επισφάλεια. Βασίζεται σε εθνογραφική έρευνα δεκατεσσάρων μηνών (Αύγουστος 2012 – Οκτώβριος 2013) στον τηλεοπτικό σταθμό ALTER TV. Επιπλέον διενεργήθηκαν δεκαπέντε ημι-δομημένες συνεντεύξεις με εργαζόμενους. Στα συμπεράσματα του άρθρου εξετάζεται η διαμόρφωση ενός νέου τύπου εργασιακού υποκειμένου μέσα από: α) την επανεπίνοηση ξεχασμένων οικονομικών διαδικασιών, β) την κινητοποίηση κάθε κοινωνικού δικτύου για την αντιμετώπιση της επισφάλειας και γ) την κριτική απέναντι στο λεγόμενο «παλιομοδίτικο συνδικαλισμό».

ΛΕΞΕΙΣ-ΚΛΕΙΔΙΑ: Ελλάδα, νεοφιλελεύθερη περίοδος, κρίση, κλάδος μέσων μαζικής ενημέρωσης, επισφάλεια, εναλλακτικές οικονομικές διαδικασίες, κοινωνικά δίκτυα, «παλιομοδίτικος» συνδικαλισμός.

1. Introduction

In this paper, we present the ethnographic case of the ex-workers of ALTER, a Greek TV channel which closed down due to mismanagement and subsequent bankruptcy. Based on participant observation in the premises of the company while it was occupied by the workers, we focus on the way they conceived working solidarity and to what extent they re-signified social bonds in a

period of extreme individuality. In addition, we explore the extent to which these workers, while being out of work, aimed at creating a political community oriented to dynamically claim the means of its social and material existence. Fieldwork took place in the channel's premises from August 2012 to October 2013, shortly after the judicial certification of the company's bankruptcy, following the relevant request of the workers themselves. It also coincided with the last months of work suspension and the occupation of the channel's premises by the workers.¹

Contemporary western societies experienced a steady tendency, after the 'golden era' of welfare capitalism, related to the transition from an 'ex-affluent' society to a qualitatively different one in which increasing insecurity and employment deprivation prevailed. As the notion of full employment seemed to be a past luxury, the new guises took a 'naturalized' form for a considerable part of the workforce pushed to live on the edge of poverty, social exclusion and unemployment. A number of studies in the social sciences have shown that one of the most deleterious effects of unemployment is social rupture. One of the most relevant classic studies was of Marienthal, Austria during the 1930s, which provides a useful basis for our discussion. Marie Jahoda's research team singled out five categories of loss suffered by the unemployed. Those who lost their job suffered from the loss of structure given by time, the absence of a regular activity, the reduction of social contacts and the lack of participation in a collective purpose, as well as the gradual decay of personal identity (Jahoda et al. 1982). For a number of scholars, unemployment is conceptualized as a way towards 'social deskilling' experienced as a condition of social humiliation (Paugam, 1991, Linhart, 2005). The central hypothesis here is that the unemployed experience a series of multiple forms of deprivation. Hence, a condition of social decline is created resulting in deregulation and ruptured social relations (Demazière, 2006). This experience leads to an antisocial way of being where agents are not only alienated from existing social networks but do not enter new ones as well. This is what Castel has called 'disaffiliation' (Castel, 1995).

Other studies conclude that unemployment is not experienced in the same way by everyone. In other words, there is no a single category of unemployment in which all people share similar social or economic features (Jahoda et al. 1982). In a similar argument, Schnapper (1994) put his emphasis on three types of unemployment. These types are closer to anthropological analysis as she focuses on agents' narratives, that is, 'absolute unemployment', 'inverted unemployment' and 'diversified unemployment'. Anthropological research has shown that once high ranking people in lower status jobs refuse to accept their new condition. However, it is accepted as soon as they borrow money from their children in order to get by (Newman 1999). A recent study concerned itself less with ideal types and more with the cognitive framework of the unemployment experience in a comparison of three world cities: Tokyo, Paris and Sao Paulo (Demazière, Guimarães, Hirata and Sugita, 2013). Researchers took into account the national, social and cultural differences among the informants and focused on unemployed mothers, young workers and managers.

All the studies more or less converged to illuminate a situation where unemployment is a continuous threat to one's work identity, which is not restricted to working professionals or employees but includes those who are out of work as well. In addition, it has been stressed that the experience of unemployment increases significantly the probability of downward occupational mobility and lessens the possibility of an escape from this vulnerability (Edgell, 2006). Moreover, a number of anthropological studies point to the fact that unemployment is experienced as a condition of liminality² for those involved in a process of forcefully losing their previous status and falling into an insecure and precarious employment framework (Spyridakis, 2013).

Against these theoretical dimensions our basic research question was how the workers in our sample were handling the precarious nature of their employment situation after losing their former employment. Thus, we deal with a) the representations and the discourse of the ex-workers on the current crisis and the way it affected their work identity and their social radicalization, b) the way they try to manage their existence (Pardo, 1996) in social, economic and cultural terms in the context of a discourse supporting the 'reinvention' of forgotten economic processes as therapeutic alternatives to current crisis. Hence, we will show the new attempts of social reproduction undertaken by the ex-workers and c) their effort to mobilise any social network in order to cope with the situation of permanent precariousness as well as to create a more collective working movement contrary to 'old fashioned' syndicalism.

2. Crisis and job identity

Undoubtedly, the current economic crisis can be defined in many ways. To mention but a few of those definitions, for A. Gorz (1986), the crisis is related to the social cost of capitalist development and the consumption model based on abundance capitalism. For D. Graeber (2001; 2011), a crisis occurs as a transformation of 'inequality relationships' into 'debt relations' attributed to the fetishism of money. G. Agamben (1998), focuses on the crisis of the participatory democratic model due to the general extension of 'exceptions' by those in power. However, the purpose of an ethnographic approach is not merely theoretical consideration, but mainly the identification of those phenomena which are infused into an agents' psyche, rekindling and reorienting their self-reflection.

ALTER workers, although they defined 'crisis' in various ways, largely focused on their loss of income. As soon as the long-lasting stability and affluence provided by their wages (which lead them to identify themselves with 'privileged' public servants) took a hit, they had to discover and process new phenomena, which they had not previously considered, such as the intertwined interests and obscure practices of employers, and the warped development of the media in Greece or its maladministration. In the words of a trade unionist of the Journalists' Union of Athens Daily Newspapers:

'Before the crisis, the media world had been like a big feast in a bubble. The unions did not sufficiently research the origin of funds and their economic foundations. They were just content to manage employment. They cared about the observance of collective agreements. These enterprises, whose interests were also strongly intertwined, subsequently went bankrupt. They used to respect, to a degree, the protective laws of labour and they were also somewhat sensitive to journalism's ethics: we had managed to incorporate into our collective agreement a very large portion of the journalism Code of Conduct; therefore every side was, institutionally speaking, more or less, quite content. And very soon, the truth of what now everyone is saying about rich businessmen, bankrupt businesses and unemployed workers in our line of work was fully proven, i.e. all this raiding that took place through the banks and all these funds that have now long disappeared.' (Informant 16, 11.15.2013)

Their concern for their product was similarly limited. Most of our informants retrospectively admit that their working environment provided few opportunities for creative work. They were obliged to participate in the reproduction of a lifestyle aimed at serving specific business interests or the strengthening of consumer complacency. Yet, 'they did their job', 'got their money' and these conditions were sufficient, confirming the assessment of K. Hart (Hart et al. 2010: 11)

that 'society in the 20th century was impersonal, since life was organized by State bureaucracy, capitalist markets and science specialists. Consequently, it is not surprising that the majority of people felt alienated and powerless in the face of all this'. The narratives of our interlocutors show that such phenomena are currently perceived consciously as mere symptoms of the crisis:

'It is not the same when someone turns on their TV and they are offered garbage over and over again. We are talking about the largest proportion of the population here. I think this is the greatest crime one could ever commit, apart from murdering someone maybe... or being a doctor and losing a human life... I mean, apart from the general responsibility, it is the nature of a journalist's profession basically... The journalist, however, has another problem: he is not free to express himself... he is not really allowed to do that because he is going to be censored anyway and he will fail to convey his thoughts (...) And maybe if we could be more 'open', our minds more 'open', maybe we could... Maybe things would be better now. I'm talking about ALTER as a small scale paradigm. If we had been a little more suspicious and a little more concerned, we would have likely averted some things.' (Informant 1, 13.09.2012)

In this context one could discern two aspects of a crisis. On the one hand, its negative effects –sometimes indeed tragic –are highlighted, due to the sudden transition from a status of job security to an unemployment phase, by workers who were partly or not at all prepared for such a possibility. On the other hand, however, it is precisely this transition which is positively perceived on the grounds that it decisively influenced their awareness, their gradual development of their sociability and, in addition, their radicalization:

'Many colleagues faced very serious problems they could not manage... There were even serious health problems, a man was admitted to a mental hospital and became an inmate there... Deaths of family members; People who may have had a problem and then this whole situation came and finished them off... This happened to several... Serious health issues, psychiatric drugs, lots of people...' (Informant 1, 09.13.2012)

'I have gained things here for so long, I've gained friends, I've gained people that will be around in my life tomorrow. I think this is not something that can be counted in money. I mean, after such a gift... I don't give a damn about money. It wasn't that I didn't have friends, but I realized quite a lot of things after going through all this.' (Informant 6, 14-9-2012)

'The crisis, I think, is quite a valuable thing. It clears all the uncertainty floating around in the atmosphere. In times of intense crisis, all masks come off; you know who is who... things become crystal; clearer. I like that. It is also necessary... the way life is. Crises happen and you have to move on... one way or another.' (Informant 14, 20-9-2012)

Crisis therefore seems to function as a crucial framework for the transformation of their work identity itself. The fact that the investigation of this issue was made during a prolonged phase of liminality (Turner, 1967) of ALTER employees enabled us to discern some aspects of their previous status (state of separation) as well as a potential new situation in the phase of aggregation. In this case, we define prolonged liminality as that long period when workers safeguarded their work suspension, during which, while being in the workplace, they were not being paid, they produced nothing and they were not considered officially unemployed. Stopped here in this peculiar and long-term interstructural situation one can distinguish a judgemental and at the same time ambivalent attitude towards their work identity:

'I will stay in the channel, on the condition that I won't accept any salary reduction, which is not going to happen. It is a matter of principle, I mean. I will try to leave and claim any compensation for it. Until now I've been doing fine, but now I'm not sure what's to happen, in this

whole situation... Usually, when I want to leave a job, after doing it for many years, I want to get some compensation for it... And I do leave decently, compensation in hand (...) I won't be doing any more TV. I am not selling off my education and training for nothing. I won't be doing that. It's a matter of principle.' (Informant 1, 13-9-2012)

'If someone else takes over, I might think about it a bit better before leaving. Besides, it is quite hard to get a job these days. If they propose to me that I stay for 600 Euro... I don't value my work as low as 600 Euro. I think I am going to be clear on that, that with 600 Euros, I could probably stay for 8 hours a day, having a coffee, covering some story from a safe distance –I would be too scared to get closer– and then get back home.' (Informant 8, 15-9-2012)

Defending their specialisation in the context of a secure employment status indicates self-esteem and the development of a stable work identity; however, it appears to be undermined by the incipient structural change in the working context of media, in which this identity had been formed. Moreover, this very evolution, incites ambivalent and somewhat disdainful ideas for the future of TV, especially as a workplace:

'I think the fact that the market is shrinking is not necessarily that bad. For someone confident and competent enough.... I think that a shrinking market could wash off the bad professionals and leave only the good ones afloat. Now, that things are pretty tight and they couldn't be possibly paying for ten different employees, they would have to cut to five and those five couldn't be bad. It is not possible. They would keep five good employees, so that work can get through. Therefore, if you're good at what you do, I don't think you have something to fear, even in these days (...) job offerings have been made to me... for more serious positions, nice wages too. I mean... just now, when I was out, I was called to Proto Thema, the newspaper, to work there... a nice proposal actually. I am not stressed out about my professional future at all because I am pretty sure what I am doing. Even if I don't make another tech job, I won't be lost. I'm going to find something to do, I'm not going to perish. I am not feeling useless, you know.' (Informant 6, 14-9-2012)

In other cases, however, work identity appears to be distorted precisely because of the experience of liminality, which first led to upsets in work routine and secondly caused a kind of consciousness which prevented a return to an alienated working environment. This is due to the upheavals that occurred during the period of the channel's management by the workers and the social bonds developed while safeguarding the channel's broadcasts. This seems to be an experience not redeemable or exchangeable in market terms:

'I can't even get back here. I don't think I know for sure if it's about my salary or myself, or if it's more about the fact that I'm one year and a half here and I think I've already closed this cycle. I mean... this experience is just too much and too different... Oh boy, how we met each other, how much we've been through, how many shocks we had to take... managing things... with people you've met... with some indecencies... with new friendships... I think I just want to leave all this as it is, in my mind. Also, financially, I am not sure I can actually leave, although this will depend on how bad the situation is going to be here. If it is indeed that bad, it would help to just state 'oh yes, I'm leaving'. If things get better, this will be an issue... Let's hope it is not going to get any better then!' (Informant 1a, 13-9-2012)

This attitude towards their work identity, although it does not seem to be global, largely caused their radicalization in terms of unionized struggle. However, to make this conclusion even clearer, we need to refer to certain traits of this specific TV case.

ALTER Channel appeared in the Greek media market quite vigorously, mainly through the so-called 'internal productions', i.e. long daily shows on current affairs and the arts. This resulted

in the employment of a much larger number of journalists and technicians, compared to the other Greek channels. These employees, together with the administration personnel, formed the main workforce of station workers; and although they were paid in accordance with their unions' collective agreements, they were still underpaid, compared to general TV standards. This fact initially caused their persistent and assertive claim towards their employers to promptly meet their financial obligations, since their resistance to a prolonged crisis was already limited, particularly for the tech staff, who –on station level– were the most 'proletarianised' group of workers.

On the other hand, the vast majority of workers, particularly technicians, were young people whose first employment experience took place in that channel. This resulted in a complete lack of a wider employment culture, lack of union experience and substantial political awareness. For these reasons their claims were focused almost exclusively on getting their accruals by means of taking over the station's premises and its management. Although this seems to be a radical praxis, in essence it was about serving a narrow interest rather than putting forward a larger political agenda touching upon wider society. Thus, there was also certain discontent –and sometimes friction– for the 'political exploitation' of the broadcast by some trade unionists, while an unconventional model of unionism was implemented, as we will further demonstrate. As one of the journalists said:

'First of all, when this whole thing started, in 2011... the tech guys were always more action oriented, simpler people, working for a thousand, in their majority, nothing more... and with this one thousand they have to pay for their homes... a loan... they have to live with their family, like most people. They are not making two, three, five, ten grand, so they can put up with some situations around here. And as soon as this first or second thousand were spent, they revolted. On the other hand, journalists had stashed some money away... A journalist, take me for example, I was at the newspaper besides ALTER. So I had a secondary resource, I could bear with ALTER's delayed payments. Many journalists here had a second job. (...) Administration stuff always followed the journalists. (...) But later on, in September, when payments again ran late, they reconsidered their stance and they said 'no more of that!' But this wasn't the union, it was K., their representative, who was also speaking for the workers... always the same silliness in Greece... the unions, the unionists, the politicians... it is us who vote for them and it is us who can lead them where we want them, the unionists (...) You know, the last ones to help us were the anarchists. The last people who gave us money, 200, 400 Euro, it doesn't really matter, it's not much, but it doesn't matter... they were poor people, even jobless, anarchists... this kind of people... the last ones who were here.' (Informant 5, 14-9-2012)

This polarisation, however, which came as a result of radicalisation and the prolonged period of 'safeguarding' work suspension, brought forward the pressing issue of survival as well as some scepticism on their work future.

3. Facing the crisis...

So far, this perspective on employment insecurity appears particularly interesting. In essence, it constitutes an original pattern of complex survival strategies and working scenarios, exploiting new market data or resorting to established practices from the past, activating old and new social networks and ultimately producing a new model of union management.

Unsurprisingly, the immediate reaction of a portion of workers, primarily journalists and technicians, was to maintain a second job. Although 'channel work' had been their main resource

to make a living, sometimes, either through station channels or independently, there were some opportunities for a complementary job, either not full-time or even permanent. For the majority of workers who were safeguarding their work suspension this practice was, even temporarily, a way to survive:

'So, from 1989 until 2000 you could find a job... Working at the TV stations... for the tech guys... Wages weren't that great, they were below average, I mean, way below; however, working conditions were nice – his is very important, working conditions being great– and you were out there working for some production company –because you could always work there on the side– and if you had a good reputation in the market, the money was very good. I mean, I got good money working for the TV, but not at this particular station (...) There had been times of great demand at the job market... So, they would just try and hire someone whose work result wouldn't let them down.' (Informant 1, 13-9-2012)

'At some point, at an older age, I began to occupy myself with... I was working and on the side I began to occupy myself with book translations... and the truth was that it was a great choice. But I stopped, 3-4 years ago... workload was heavy. I had my children to bring up... all by myself... I had this job here... Translations needed time and peace. I would have to abstain from sleeping, I couldn't possibly do everything at the same time. To be able to make a living with translation work... say, literature translation for example, you need to have many years on your back, you need to be well-known in the market, so you can get one assignment after another and make a living off of it. So, I couldn't entirely isolate myself from the other job and quit and do translation work exclusively. I chose to leave it behind and went on [here].' (Informant 14, 20-9-2012)

However, for some workers the loss of fixed income forced them to recall the 'forgotten' practice of the typical Greek petty bourgeois rurally based family. Of course, although we cannot possibly talk about a full resurgence of the traditional model of making ends meet, we could refer to a creative adaptation of some of its aspects to the present times. This includes the limited resort to the retail market and the utilization of untapped rural property as an alternative/additional employment option by adapting production to current demand or even as a less costly place for relocating. These aspects, although they have never been completely halted, nowadays seem to get a new meaning in the face of a crisis, which facilitates a positive reconceptualization of the countryside and its value, though often on a solely rhetorical level (Dalkavoukis, 2015). However, in the case of our informants things seem to be more structured:

'You know, we are not the type to consume that much –we never did. Now, over time, we are heading towards a domestic economy... literally... We have a small farm in the village and we can make our vegetables there. We go there two times and work around the clock, as long as there's some daylight. So we already have all the vegetables we need, we don't have to buy any of those. We have to buy our milk, of course, but we try to get it from the village when we are there. We get enough for 3-4 days, we make our own yoghurt and that's it... We never had to buy bread since, for many years now, we have been getting wheat from the village and make our own. Same goes with sweets and pasta, we even have a special apparatus for that... When it comes to clothing, we usually wear what we can get from friends and relatives –and I am not ashamed to admit it– with the exception of children's shoes which we need to buy anyway...' (Informant 1, 13-9-2012)

'Since I come from a rural family of Macedonia, I've already looked into this, and I am going to plant levanter there. Fields there are right and proper for it: an altitude of 700m or more (...) they are not made as flat watering fields, they are sloppy, so the water can slide off... There's enough rain up there... and it is ideal for what I want to do. It just needs lots of work for the first

couple of years, to do all the weeding work, so levanter is not smothered in wild grass. I have plenty of time –already, I sit around doing nothing- I have plenty of time to start doing some manual labour...’ (Informant 5, 14-09-2012)

One could, of course, underline an apparent contradiction between the two practices: on the one hand resorting to the retail market in terms of globalized capitalism and on the other retreating to self-production, self-consumption and exchange, in terms of limited social networking. Prima facie those two seem incompatible as they refer either to different political starting points towards conventional economy or to different significations of the countryside as a ‘place’. In any case, these practices show but the grassroots’ creativity and innovative spirit when faced with adverse social and economic conditions. In this context, the debate on ‘downward occupational mobility’, as indicated by part of the literature (Edgell, 2006), may not function, in our case, as an effective analytical tool, since it perceives employment in terms of profession and not in terms of overall social activity leading to social reproduction. This is how our informants seem to understand it in our excerpts. Their experience, at least from a social point of view, is positively perceived. In this sense, the crisis could be a proper background for the production of new theoretical tools, more tailored to the logic by which agents formulate their own strategies, utilizing a wide range of responses to it. However, their narratives seem to be much closer to the standard employment identity, especially when they refer to the ‘nature’ of journalism in a flexible and high tech period. This unexpectedly goes against the discourse of the ‘new’ media scene which requires a degree of self-financing, multiple jobs, competitiveness and little or no union coverage:

‘For me, journalism is over, for many years now. Since I quit ALTER.... And the reason I stayed there in the first place was because the money was good – of course not anything more than what’s specified in our collective agreement... The agreement that ESHEA had made was really good, journalists working for TV stations. And this wasn’t the only reason; sometimes I covered stories that I really wanted... sometimes... maybe one story out of ten was the kind that I really fancy in journalism (...) But I am not giving up. Once it was the pen, now it is the computer. On the contrary, computers open new doors, to do things over the Internet without any bosses above your head. I am not giving up. Me and 50 others we have created exelxeis.gr... It is a news site, created by the journalists after the first suspension. I am involved in this process, roughly 40 of us from ALTER and another 10 or 15 coming from other ‘shops’.. We put some money on the site as well, trying to make it commercially viable, to compete with other sites, to make some money... To be entrepreneurs with shares, partners, participants... you can call it whatever you like. We are even considering setting up some web TV and the like there. For me, we need more independent journalism. It is extinct. You might say... internet is brimming with blogs... You could read some journalists there, but really random stuff... Yes, we do sign our articles... On the side, I am a writer –not something I do for money, but as a mere journalist– for a blog. ‘Peiratiko Reportaz’³ is the name and we just hang out there... We don’t actually work there, we just write for our own pleasure... 10 news reporters talking about Piraeus and Shipping. We can also express our opinions for more specific matters; we even admit that, more or less: whatever we are not allowed to say in our mainstream newspapers, TV and radio stations, we write it there. We just say things as they are, our own view, properly signed...’ (Informant 5, 14-9-2012)

During our fieldwork we repeatedly discussed with our informants the possibility of re-opening the station on a cooperative basis in the context of the so-called ‘social economy’ (Nasioulas, 2012), and elsewhere, especially in Argentina (Vieta, 2010; Dobrusin, 2012), where bankrupt companies became operational through the model of collective management.⁴ This debate was

kindled by the station's successful course during the brief period of worker management, after the first work stoppage, despite the extremely adverse conditions. We found, however, that despite their enthusiasm about this brief experience of self-management, their views became more conventional on the issue. They argued about station management in terms of 'competition' and of 'getting a piece of the state pie', which in their view would require interdependence or hierarchical structure. They argued, in other words, in favour of a television model as they had experienced it themselves, i.e. as 'private employees' working for a large-scale enterprise, where they had felt satisfied as mere workers. They even invoked as a counter-argument that something similar had been suggested by a senior manager of the station, when problems seemed to be unsurmountable. They also showed similar suspicions towards their trade unions, and especially that of journalists, which informally suggested to them such a solution on the basis of other successful cases, such as the Efimerida ton Syntakton (The Journal of Journalists). In this respect, the view that 'the experience of ALTER did not result in a qualitative change in the media' seems to be justified:

'My political view, then and even more now –which I think has already been vindicated– is that workers should establish cooperatives of self-management. I mean, if one expects a swift solution with bankrupt enterprises within the byzantine court system, they will have to wait for many years to come for it and, even then, I don't think they could find justice or get their money. Or, if they are expecting investors or new bosses, this will inevitably lead to new types of corruption. Who would invest in a costly endeavour, seeking to consolidate and balance the business with the market in a serious decline? For this reason, then, the ALTER experiment was to keep the station functional, to enter into a self-management model and then fully claiming it on the political level. For this is something that would need the Law to change, for the station frequency to be passed on to them. Well, in the case of ALTER there was no legal way for someone to take over the station frequency. There is no such provision in the Law, like the one for radio frequencies. So, what needed to be done was to break the law, to make their stand, find support in society, fund themselves; and this is exactly the direction they took (...) However, this whole ALTER experience did not turn into a qualitative change in the media world. The TV system has withheld the frequency and most probably at some point it will be passed on to a new investor, although I wouldn't know how. Or it will be passed on by the current owners, while they are still legally entitled to it. This is the first time something like that happens (...) I would still believe that [self-management] could be the key for the general reform of the country towards productivity; as the saying would go 'work as hard as you can, without a boss'. Makes sense, since the bosses have literally robbed the country and slipped 300 or 500 billion into foreign banks... You have to be a man of your words. So I am not going to wait for the new boss, a new 'father', a new 'daddy'. Well I think that at this point society has come to this stage: it has to be emancipated or perish! Has to take action or die by its own hand! Has to immigrate or decline into psychopathy and alcoholism! This is how it is now. You can't go against it. Is there a hope for an alternative? Or we could wait twenty years for the crisis to be over and the economy to be restarted with investment capitals in a degraded environment, which by then will have completely destroyed the whole process.' (Informant 16, 15-11-2013)

Could such a condition exceed the capabilities of a working subject with little experience in employment culture and generally with low political radicalization, as already noted? The legal impossibility - as our informants underlined - of self-management, did not prevent them from mobilising a number of fixed social networks (such as their family or friends) or from creating new ones, either in order to making ends meet or to put forward their claims. But above all – and this is what they themselves recognize as their most important contribution – they managed to introduce an

experimental logic into the TV scene, an 'alternative TV' during the period of self-management. This does not only concern a 'militant journalism' which 'dares to reveal what systemic stations conceal', but also a socially sensitive attitude towards colleagues and disadvantaged citizens. This view refers to the 'period of free air', as informants named it, during which they were 'transformed' from 'ALTER employees' into a social network. So, even though they failed to establish a permanent self-management, for a long time they succeeded in collectively managing extremely pressing needs, such as those of psychological survival and mutual support:

'Then we aired an alternative news bulletin... Now, 'alternative' is pretty relative; We did what we could, since we couldn't all go to work for free... we couldn't use any of the station's equipment. We produced a news bulletin... focusing on unions and labour... It was the first time something like that had occurred in Greece and it was exceptional. Sometimes it went sky high in viewership (...) People brought us food, children's food and the like... children's clothes etc. When a big package of diapers etc arrived, we thought that maybe we could, too, give the others something as a gesture of solidarity – something that steelworkers taught us. Steelworkers were the first to show up here, to provide their strong support, when the police first came [...] So, we went to the institution for infants 'Mitera' – this was in December– and the guys froze stiff... It was X. and N.G who went down there. So, they asked the personnel there 'Why is it so cold in here?' and they were told that the institution had no money to buy petrol and no one is really responding to their invitations for tenders, since they know they will probably not be getting paid. Then we went to meet with the gas station owners, met with their president [and asked him] to provide the institution with a thousand euro worth of petrol. And this came from the money that the federation had given us, so we thought we could offer one thousand for that cause. In total we had five thousand to manage, and we outsourced it to various things... So, the president of the gas station owners agreed to supply the institute with one thousand euro worth of petrol – he even added two hundred out of his own pocket. The guys at the institute couldn't believe their eyes; this is the human side of things. These are the things we can be proud of' (Informant 1, 13-9-2012).

'It was November 10 when we first started. There were people there who had nothing eat... Three or four of them even lived and slept here. I informed the committee myself – cause I was a part of the six-member committee. 'Guys, I'm going to get out and openly plead for food. We made the decision to accept food instead of money. Food, food, food... So I went to this radio show and they kept me there for half an hour; talks over talks and we scoured through websites and we set things in motion... 'ALTER is in need of food'... And food began to flow in. We must have managed over 15-20 tons of food here. The members of 'PAME'... after their many conflicts in here, they took the food back... I told them 'Guys, if the tomatoes seem deep red to you, just leave them here...' Some wanted to take them, I wish they had... PAME, besides the lamp meat they brought here, must have brought in 3-4 tons of food in total... PAME alone. Whoever came to visit, we urged them to get some food for themselves. We had made such an announcement at the website we kept... Then we made five sub-committees: the safeguard committee, the solidarity committee which managed all the food coming in, the dispensary committee which oversaw the establishment of a makeshift infirmary, the website committee and then, in the end, the cook-house committee, where we actually prepared our meals.' (Informant 2, 13-9-2012)

Moreover – and this in our view is equally important – workers faced crises with a new kind of union action, unprecedented, at least in Greece. Despite their general trade union inexperience –and perhaps thanks to it– and an instinctive aversion towards 'professional' unionists, they produced a pattern which overcame unionistic entanglements, with a super-union character,

focused on the level of the company and on their particular claims, by making use of their experienced trade unionists and simultaneously strictly monitoring their roles in general meetings. Thus, it was made possible for them to effectively confront the strikebreaking mechanisms of employers and at the same time maintain a highly reliable operation, rallying a substantial portion of their colleagues around an extreme form of struggle as the 'safeguarding of work suspension' – which was practically an occupation of the station's facilities.

'And the worst part was that there was some [speculation] from the side of employers that... 'Oh you know the tech guys call you stupid, they call you snitches...' There were rumours that journalists call the tech guys 'reeks'. There was an artificial animosity incited by the rats of employers... This had to stop. We had to stop it ourselves, as the workers' unionists and representatives. First we became united and then the workers became united and this is how we achieved all this. Journalists had to proceed to work suspension first, this is us, then followed administration stuff, then the technicians, because they wouldn't trust us journalists to join their struggle or they would have to fall flat on their faces once more, since the last time they proceeded to a work stoppage on their own they failed miserably and started receiving notices. But what kind of notice could you possibly give when the whole 'shop', every worker in it, proceeds to work suspension? The first time, they were just a few of them, an easy target for an extrajudicial notice...' (Informant 5, 14-9-2012).

'I attended exhaustive meetings, along with all the unions and all the legal counsellors. We had infused them with the idea of an electable labour committee, a mixed one, the idea of self-management (...) The days of old fashioned trade unionism [are over]; from now on there will only be the unionism of super-union cooperation and foundational support for our colleagues – at least those who dare. Because we could also reference some counterexamples. In many cases, some colleagues, scared or subdued, call it whatever you wish, turned their backs on the union. And they opted for their own [personal] negotiation. Although, whenever we had the people with us, I think we took some positive risks. I mean, we managed to get our message through: That something marvellous is happening in the world of media and now, I think, wider society is, to a great extent, pretty aware of this; that this cause had a central issue; that public knowledge and the Press are sensitive values that you cannot leave prey to obscurity and intertwining interests.' (Informant 16, 15-11-2013)

4. Conclusions

There is no doubt that the ethnographic research in ALTER channel brought forward a series of complex issues. Could we possibly, through the experience of ALTER employees, claim that a new type of worker is starting to emerge? And what would be its characteristics? We believe that we came across a type of worker distinguishable from the one of the so called 'affluent era', who undertakes risks and devises innovative adaptations more out of force than out of choice. In particular, resorting to past social practices (Tsoukalas, 2008, Panayotopoulos, 2008), such as the dynamic re-emergence of kin and friend based networks, along with the recourse to the primary sector, either for home consumption or for retail purposes, constitutes a crisis response system that seeks to overpass the current ordeal.

So what is there new that this inchoate work subject might introduce us to? A preliminary answer to this question would be 'a new culture of social, political and cultural networking that is, in principle, age-related': it basically consists of younger employees, who are familiar with new technologies and with minimal political awareness, because their precariousness coin-

cided with the depreciation of the old-fashioned political party establishment. This freed them from the rhetoric of the classic trade unionism and the protective Statism. Thus, they tend to construct new social networks, they focus on specific goals and manage their needs on a new ethical basis. In many ways, they are reminiscent of the fragmented social and political subject of Guattari (1984) without, however, an effective communication with older political aims of a similar character. To some extent, they seem to function as a 'community of practice' (Lave and Wenger, 1991), which is not made up by a group of people who share a craft and/or a profession, but mainly through the process of sharing information and experiences, have an opportunity to evolve themselves personally and professionally.

How about politics, then? In the narratives of our informants, politics has a rather small place, at least regarding its effectiveness. Yet, it is evident that, especially through the discussion on the experiment of self management, politics remains in the consciousness of many as the context, without which any attempt at establishing a new collective subject and a new way of managing the economy and society, will remain a vacuous effort or a fruitless 'experiment'. In our case, this new type of worker, who seems to teeter between confidence in his labour value and the structural precariousness of the new employment model, necessarily becomes self-aware of his new work identity, that of the 'precariat', and his still hidden power as one of the 'the new dangerous class' (Standing, 2011).

Notes

1. For a detailed account about ALTER Channel since its establishment (1990) see Dalkavoukis – Kokkinou – Spyridakis 2016.
2. The concept of liminality comes from the elaborated version of Turner's study about the ritual process based upon Arnold Van Gennep's work on rites de passage who is credited with the term. It describes individuals as liminal entities who are neither here nor there (Turner 1967: 95).
3. <http://peiratikoreportaz.blogspot.gr/> Acquisition date: 6/13/2015.
4. See also European Confederation of Workers' Cooperatives, Social Cooperatives and Social and Participative Enterprises (CECOP–CICOPA Europe). 2012. *The resilience of the cooperative model* (Brussels).

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