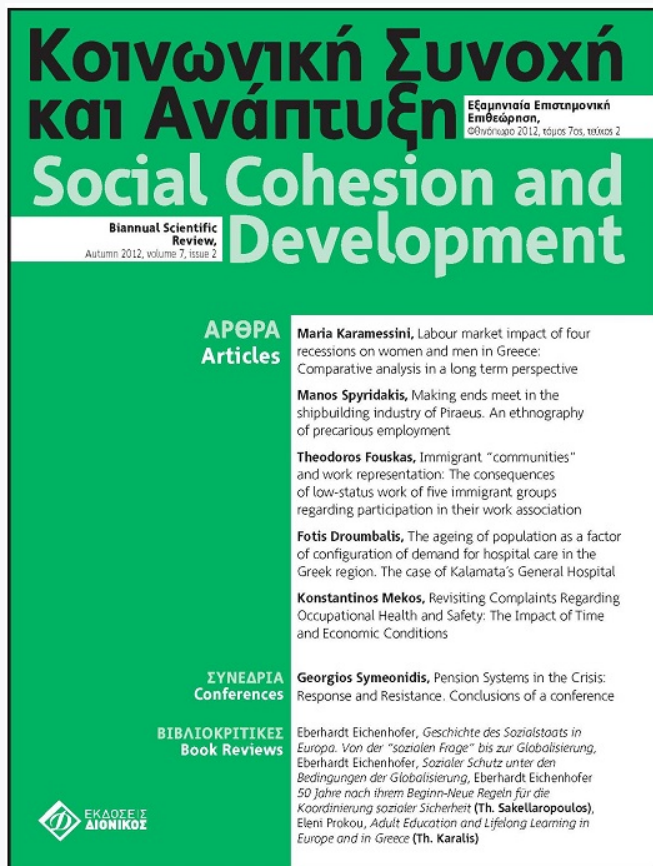


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# Making ends meet in the shipbuilding industry of Piraeus. An ethnography of precarious employment

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## Κερδίζοντας τα προς το ζην στη ναυπηγική βιομηχανία του Πειραιά. Εθνογραφία στο πλαίσιο μιας επισφαλούς απασχόλησης

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### ABSTRACT

In this paper I address the way shipbuilding workers attempt to cope with employment precariousness in the context of shipbuilding activities in the workplace of Perama zone, a suburb of western Piraeus area. Added emphasis is placed on how workers conceive of their involvement into local labour processes and for this reason I focus on the social relations developed during the process of managing their existence.

**KEY WORDS:** Informal economy, employment relations, ethnography of work, employment precariousness, political technology

### ΠΕΡΙΛΗΨΗ

Στο παρόν κείμενο διερευνώ τον τρόπο με τον οποίο οι εργαζόμενοι στη ναυπηγική βιομηχανία επιχειρούν να αντιμετωπίσουν την εργασιακή τους επισφάλεια στο πλαίσιο των ναυπηγικών δραστηριοτήτων που λαμβάνουν χώρα στην περιοχή του Περάματος. Δίδεται έμφαση στο πώς οι εργαζόμενοι αυτοί αντιλαμβάνονται την εμπλοκή τους στις τοπικές διαδικασίες εργασίας και για το λόγο αυτό εστιάζω στις κοινωνικές σχέσεις που αναπτύσσονται κατά τη διαδικασία διαχείρισης της ύπαρξής τους.

**ΛΕΞΕΙΣ-ΚΛΕΙΔΙΑ:** Άτυπη οικονομία, εργασιακές σχέσεις, εθνογραφία της εργασίας, εργασιακή επισφάλεια, πολιτική τεχνολογία

## 1. Introduction

In the Perama zone the 87% of shipbuilding and repairing activities in Greece takes place being at the crossroads of the sea routes of Black Sea-Suez canal, Black Sea -Gibraltar and the Gibraltar-Suez canal<sup>1</sup>. There are about 850 small-scale enterprises employing a largely undefined casual workforce. Currently the area is passing through a devastating deindustrialization process due to the global competition, its organizational weaknesses and technological lag as well. The unemployment rates of the economically active population have reached worrying levels and keep on rising. At this moment, the sector hardly employs more than 2,000 workers.

The destructive consequences of the deindustrialization, which hit the region, are well depicted on informants' accounts. The most common representation on the issue describes a dismal

reality, that is, *“the area is to the workers what the heart is to man. If it stops ticking, he dies”*, as one informant said. Considering, therefore, that most local households currently have or used to have at least one member employed in this industrial activity (Vlachos, 1996, 3) one can imagine the repercussions for the local community in material and social terms.

As far as local workers are concerned the ethnographic data show that they create socially meaningful relationships and construct webs of significance while being in the workplace either working or looking for job in the context of a highly cruel labour market. Shipbuilding workers by being part and parcel of wider socio-economic processes and relations devise survival practices and a particular innovative logic through which a series of facts and activities gain meaning which in due course are proved useful in order to cope with the violence of extreme situations (Procoli, 2004, 4).

The experience of being in and out of work in the area of Perama is primarily defined by the structure of shipbuilding and shiprepairing activities marked by two key procedures: contractors bargain for the repairing of a part or the whole of a ship and potential employees negotiate for their labour on a daily basis, since the nature of shipbuilding and shiprepairing work is rarely based on a full-time employment. Depending on market conditions the employment relations between bosses and workers are mediated by commitments stemming from formal and informal contracts under the employment regime of subcontracting<sup>2</sup> which traditionally has been characterized the local labour market.

The vast majority of workers are employed casually in non standard forms of employment as day labourers in the local enterprises and for this reason it is quite difficult, if not almost impossible, one to define accurately their number. Many of them are employed in jobs different from their own specialty because of the lack of employment and due to the local economic recession there are others who try to find a job in other workplaces as well. In the rather rare case of formal contracts bosses and workers comply with the National Collective Working Agreement signed every year. The most usual practice, however, concerns the labor relations which do not follow the National regulatory labor framework, that is informal employment.

The notion of informal economy in general has long been debated in anthropology (Benton 1990, Pardo 1996, Narotzky 1997, Mollona 2009). The term, as such, is imprecise for it includes a number of practices which vary depending on the context in which they are placed. According to Pahl they have to be located in a specific place and time in order to be assessed and examined as, *“it is impossible to lay down universally applicable concrete characteristics of informal trades and activities, since these characteristics will vary from economy to economy, depending on the nature of the social formation”* (Pahl, 1984, 114). Thus, certain forms of part-time employment, like piecework done in households for instance, may be illegal in one context yet legal in another. It may well be that the state promotes a mixture of formal and informal activities for the *“sake”* of commerce and easy money circulation. The example of Mezzogiorno in Italy regarding part-time work is illustrative from this point of view since the legislation used to be more tolerant and flexible compared to other countries (Mingione, 1989, 563-576). Therefore the *“nature”* of the local labour market in every industrial setting has to be examined in its specificity and uniqueness.

Anthropological analysis has already shed light on the conditions facilitating informal economy and the activities embedded in it. Lauren Benton argues that the recruitment of unprotected labor through subcontracting and homework is neither a backward phenomenon nor a new event in the history of capitalist development. On the contrary it is a common feature of capitalist industrialisation in both developed and developing countries (Benton 1990). What is more, the

expansion of informal activities is an integral part of industrialisation and deindustrialisation processes entailing labor cost minimisation and more flexible forms of work. Mollona, for instance, analyses the way informal activities have "returned" in Endcliffe as the outcome of the gradual disappearance of steel industry where workers participate in two ways, in the form of outsourced work and of casual labor for steel companies (Mollona 2009). Being that as it may, however, from workers point of view informal activities are a means to get by in the context of harsh economic conditions. Pardo's study on Naples is a case in point for it shows that agents are involved in informal activities out of necessity due to the existing economic and political environment defined by local power elites creating thus conditions of inequality in terms of making ends meet. From their point of view, however, as Pardo's subtle analysis shows, agents follow ethical and rational codes of practices taking into account the limits and the possibilities the existing situation formulates while trying to manage their existence at their best (Pardo 1996).

As far as Perama is concerned the predominant crisis over the last years coupled with the gradual deindustrialization<sup>3</sup> to which the wider Piraeus region is subjected, increases unemployment and downgrades even more the employment conditions. Unemployment in the area harms seriously older workers in the first place who do not have the possibility to change occupation and they need a certain number of insurance stamps for retirement. This, however, becomes a dystopic task for the many as there exist oversupply of working force in relation to the actually limited demand. In addition, the completion of any work task is every time carried out by crews, created so as to be flexible in number all over the course of production. Enterprises have intentionally an indefinable structure and for this reason it is not possible to be officially registered in a permanent status in order to be effectively inspected by state authorities and be reliable towards potential clients<sup>4</sup>. These conditions entail the integration of the majority of workers, particularly the long-term unemployed, in the local market, under unfavorable terms. Consequently, they are involved mainly in informal economic activities which, as elsewhere, have the following characteristics: 1. They produce services and goods for the market, 2. They are not formally registered and therefore they evade taxation, 3. They absorb low income labor force, 4. They avoid increasing state control, particularly as to abiding by collective work agreements or legislation for health, safety and social insurance, and 5. They are geographically concentrated in particular areas (Vaiou - Chatzimichalis 1997: 35).

Even though the conditions described are embedded within the field of informal economy they constitute an extra means for workers, if not the only one, to strategically rearrange the modes of their social reproduction, as well as a signifying action code. This code is associated with the creation of cultural capital which, on the one hand is used in status markets so as to maintain or reinforce someone's symbolic "price" in them and on the other it constitutes an exchange unit, as it exactly happens with economic capital which can be transformed into or exchanged with other forms of benefits or disadvantages (Berger, 1995, 45).

These, along with the quality of employment status are not new phenomena in the area. Neither do they seem to be the sudden result of globalization procedures and the commands it thrusts on agents as the local labor market has always been part of recession and recovery procedures of the globalized shipping capital<sup>5</sup>. It is for this reason that the casual employment structure preexisted today's crisis, it is not its current result, operating alongside the need to hire a minimum number of full time (core workers) labor force. The novelty element of employment locally is related to the fact that its casual character is nowadays a daily familiar misfortune for a growing number of workers since the present recession has an overall effect on their income, and, consequently, affects crucially other economic activities apart from shipbuilding as well.

## 2. Getting by practices

The case of Perama workers constitutes a significant example about the way manual labor “insists” on reminding that in the so called post-industrial period of employment tertiarization the relations of exploitation and of inequality during labor process have not essentially changed. Yet, it “insists” as well on reminding, as it will be shown, that workers do not adapt passively in this asymmetrical framework for through their lived know-how, imaginative skillfulness and empirical flexibility, they attempt to improve the conditions of their existence.

In this framework, the ethnographic and, mainly, the sociological research, in the European setting particularly, has shown that the Fordist mode of production wasn’t a generalized model in the industrial regions of the world, far more in the developing ones. Furthermore, it points to the fact that agents struggle for the improvement of the terms of their negotiating ability by being adapting selectively to the demands imposed by remote power structures.

The picture one gets from Perama zone is that workers are not fully integrated in the Marxian process of absolute surplus value extraction due to wider socioeconomic conditions and to their strategic choices (de Certeau, 1988, 30). The following extract from an interview with a metal-welder who has been incessantly working for about 25 years in the region’s “shops”<sup>6</sup> is revealing:

*“In reality what happens is to work with less than normal wage, to be easy, under the pressure of unemployment, to violate the collective bargaining agreement, laws, etc. The contractor is trying to find his best for his interests, to make more profit. This is the nature of our job. Now about the union, we go on strike and have managed to pass an agreement to hire a 30% from union’s list and limit somehow bosses’ speculative behaviors, little can be done. There is always the fear from the boss side there will be in the shop a couple of union members ready to discover that their co-workers are paid with broken wages. But this is a rare case and in general there exists the violation of every proper rule putting in danger our lives you know. And for this we have so many accidents. All accidents are arbitrary; they are the combination of number of arbitrary behaviors here. And now with unemployment rising you cannot inspect working conditions neither the union nor Port Authorities, nobody, because the area is too large and permissions given for reparings are issued almost everyday. So workers go searching for jobs they cannot be inspected, they can’t do otherwise, they must work, to feed their families. The union objective is not to intervene, it can not intervene. And you know when these jobs last for two or three days what can you check? It isn’t easy. The smaller the business is the less difficult the inspection becomes, nobody talks. When the job is short it is still difficult to be discovered, it isn’t announced. So, broken wages and accidents go together even if the union goes regularly to the workplace. The accident can happen anytime, any hour, an oversight can cause a fatal accident or any other accident. But it isn’t only that, people do not just die in the ship, there people crippled and diseased by the nature of work etc. For these workers nobody talks”.*

Casual labor, as it is apparent in the above extract, affects the vast majority of workers. Due to its structure and to the low demand for it currently, workers look for a financial way out not only in the local market but also for jobs that can potentially contribute to completing their income. Thus, it is a particularly usual phenomenon for one to be multi-employed and financially multi-active in jobs that are in a way related to the specialties required by shipbuilding activities. This practice constitutes an alternative way of improving the terms of social reproduction as well as of choosing specific kinds of casual employment each time, depending on the prevalent conditions. To the degree that employment is qualitatively downgraded due to its precariousness and the flourishing

of opportunistic subcontracting (Holmes 1986)<sup>7</sup>, the critical assessment of the survival needs and the conditions of the work task to be met orients workers either to accepting or turning down any possible job offered. Many were the informants who, for a number of reasons—the safety and security measures being in lead—, albeit in a difficult financial situation, did not always accept to work for particular contractors in the region. Obviously, most of these activities are not officially registered due to their informal character.

As a matter of fact, within the local context of high inequality and increasing unemployment workers follow a number of alternative strategies within the micro-level of social action, aiming mainly to stress their presence as working people in the region. The social networks conveying information regarding employment perspectives or about a job's quality constitute alternative ways of managing the local social everyday life. The complementary income which is not based only on casual wages but also on nutrition supplies coming from workers' place of origin in the countryside as well as the financial or barter aid of family networks signify the multiform character (Pahl, 1984, 128) of financial activities, recontextualising the spatiotemporality of everyday social practice. In this sense, workers attempt to expand their social contacts through family and friendship bonds, the trade union and their neighbors as well. In this process it should be added the practice of long-term exchanges in the form of providing favors, services and mutual support, phenomena that have a long historical presence locally.

Undoubtedly, one should take into serious consideration the fact that employment locally is rarely based on a full-time structure. The local "contrata", in workers' idiom, of employment, either agreed orally (Watson 2001) or rarely officially among the parties involved, unavoidably lead to the production of surplus value. Thus, even though the region is financially embedded in the global division of labor because of the fare fluctuations and the ever present political decision making, the internal division of labor has basically pre-capitalist elements characterizing it to the extent that agents are based on oral information, on everyday visits at the workplace in search for employment and on the quality of their relations with local bosses.

Consequently, the most important element of the local labor market is the "division" of information<sup>8</sup> which is directly associated with the current hierarchical organization of the employment structure, since not everyone has equiponderant access to it. Besides, the predominant relations of production combined with the market needs create demands for services and products at particular time periods favoring a small proportion of the overabundant labor force. In this light, the local subcontractors are just the mediators between production and market processes. Working people, on the other hand, are embedded in this situation trying to make the proper choices and to manage correspondingly the careful and critically assessed sale of their labor value.

### 3. Remote structures and agents' perspective

**T**he accumulated and lived experience of workers in the region as far as the present and future of their employment is concerned, entails a kind of skepticism regarding the way of legitimacy imposition of impersonal power structures, in terms of local discourse, such as the state, the European Union and the syndicate<sup>9</sup>. Based on local political representations one gets the impression that these institutional hierarchies imposed by a remote mechanism of political technology upon people's lives (Shore and Wright, 1997, 10) are distrusted because the decisions they make support and perpetuate inequality and discrimination excluding a large part of the labor force from claiming their life as workers in the first place.

The majority of workers, but also many syndicalists, recognize this fact, when, for instance, they refer to the ineffective way in which the state manages E.U. subsidies regarding local development. The latter is a core component of political discourse but also of political rhetoric locally as “shops” do not show the necessary aptitude for modernization projects. In this perspective the lack of trust to every “qualified” authority, the syndicate included, emerges as a logical effect<sup>10</sup>. The following extract from an interview with a 50-year-old pipe fitter is rather enlightening:

*“Now we are obliged by the union to take from it too a 30% of the unemployed people and now what. They go from there always the same and the same persons.*

*Question: And the others don't see what's happening?*

*Answer: They see it but what can they do, like I'm telling you now, why go and register at the syndicate, I haven't registered at all. So what can I do if they will cover me the day, I'll not go because at some point you get tired, and I'll not be able to be present, even though I am registered at the unemployed list, maybe they will send the last who is registered who is their mate. If you are the exception and you're there and they call you and they ask for a couple of people and you are the next registered and it's your turn and you're standing over their head and you see it, maybe they'll send you. If you miss one day, I'm telling you, one day, they skip you, they don't call, they say you got to be there. These are not decent things. Because if you are decent... there must be a list today it's this guy's and that guy's turn... tomorrow you go to that shop and you work. Unfortunately this is it so far, I mean this is the repair zone, that's it.”*

Workers' critique is focused to a great extent on the syndicate's choices, without rejecting it as a whole, though. What is particularly reproached is its redistributive and managing role<sup>11</sup> while handling a crisis condition. The syndicate's basic target, according to the local political representations, should be the maintenance and expanding of the network of ship owners-customers who would prefer Perama zone for their fleet. In other words, the syndicate, in their views, should be more active towards the market, attracting customers and at the same time covering, to the extent that it is possible, the disappearing state intervention along with applying the established inspections regarding the quality of work which are necessary anyway. In this way, the local working community could have a more essential participation in the decision making procedures, find out in better terms employment information and face in time and in a more organized way the vibrations resulting from the international shipping capital fluctuations.

This wishful thinking, however, is far from being realized. Suggestions of this kind have been dismissed in the past as “anti-working class” ones and as serving personal interests supposedly being in contrast to the “solidarity” ideals of the “proletariat” and to working class interests in general<sup>12</sup>. On the other hand, it is difficult to deny that many are the workers who wouldn't wish to participate to what is going on inside the syndicate because of its inflexible, as they put it, policy.

A typical example is that of the above-mentioned measure of hiring a percentage of 30% of workers registered on the trade union's unemployment list. This arrangement was initially addressed towards supporting the metalworkers who were a step before retirement and who due to the recession of the last years couldn't complete the necessary number of insurance stamps. One of the preconditions, however, of participating to the benefits of the measure was, and still is, the constant and obligatory presence at the Trade Union headquarters, regardless of whether an employment post is announced or not for the supposed increasing of working class reciprocity. However, this is but a bureaucratic measure for many workers either participate typically in order just to show that they are present in the existing system of information circulation, as is the case in the workplace or they do not wish to get involved in time-consuming procedures to the extent

they can get employment information through other sources. In addition, with time, a priority at the unemployment list has not only been given to the elder workers but also to the long-term unemployed under vague and ambiguous criteria, a fact that caused intense controversy and suspiciousness among metalworkers in general.

This impression was increasingly confirmed as the syndicalists were rarely jobless since due to their institutional role they had the possibility to get employment information beforehand knowing the job deals in the zone much faster as well as their quality conditions. Consequently, many of the metalworkers that I came in touch with classify the syndicate among those corporatist institutions that incorporate the dominant ideology, redistributing the hope for employment or the information about a job, and, due to that, maintaining the distance from theory to practice. The syndicate, therefore, is not a coalition resistance mechanism from the agents' point of view, but an additional, depending on the case, means for finding an employment.

At a time during which such a practice is widespread the rhetoric about socialistic and solidarity visions is transformed into a dead letter as syndicalists themselves are de facto forced to comply<sup>13</sup> with the existing employment structure in order to negotiate the labour power of the workers registered in the trade union, becoming thus a mechanism of consent and political integration (Femia, 1981, 35), rather than claiming workers' rights and creating the conditions for further polarization between registered members and those who do not wish to participate in it. At the same time, this kind of practice originates from political parties' preferences too, particularly regarding the hiring of workers in the large and organized shipyards of the region located at Eleusis bay in the west of Perama. In this light as Lockwood has put it, "the main end that trades unions have sought to attain through legislative action is that of securing and legitimating their own corporate status: namely, what Marshall refers to as a secondary system of industrial citizenship parallel with and supplementary to the system of political citizenship", (Lockwood, 1988, 67). It is, therefore, due to the reasons above mentioned that workers are forced to choose either to act in an individualistic way for job information through their own social networks or to use the trade union as an alternative source for it rather than as a structural mechanism for the empowerment of the "ideal" of working class solidarity.

## 4. Innovative Actors

So far the ethnographic data regarding the practices (Bourdieu 1977) of everyday work experience as well as the concepts about institutions expressing a compromised with the capital rationale show that the imposition of the dominant political technology, through the existing political and economic structures, looks like a one way and homogenizing condition. This fact possibly gives the impression of a kind of a static situation pointing to the process through which agents become subjects of the dominant ideology. However, this picture is configured through a macroscopic consideration of the situation. For if this imposition has an overwhelming character, then how could one explain the critique towards the institutional mechanisms as well as the selective denial of working in perilous conditions and in a context of unemployment aggravation? How one could explain the fact that many workers use the syndicate for their own purposes while they simultaneously reject its political existence developing alternative ways of finding a job, following the route of active absence? In addition, at this point there is a significant methodological question coming up. Which process, in terms of social research, constitutes an "official" way of earning



one's existence and which one does not when we refer to a social phenomenon the existence of which is founded on institutionalizing inequality and power asymmetry<sup>14</sup>? The supportive social networks and the exchange of favors, in the form of canalizing the information and mutual aid, the female labor, the informal labor, issues which, at a first glance, are not perceived as purely "productive" activities and exist off the formal economy realm, are they just the outcome of a particular economic and political rationality or do they constitute a differential approach in relation to the dominant one to the degree that workers live permanently in a precarious context?

I have the impression that local workers do not adjust themselves in the logic of a biological mechanism, to the demands of the dominant ideology or culture. On the contrary, they are embedded in the rules of a power system geometry becoming deliberately its bearers, creating, however, the conditions for managing their lived experience in their attempt to improve the conditions of their social reproduction. In this sense, workers are not conceptually identical to the concept of individualized action which basically isolates agents from the existing power structures amputating the rational relations with its environment (natural, human, cultural, material) and distorting, therefore, its relations with reality downgrading them to a bag of pre-given roles. Human relations cannot be reduced to a mathematical approach because they include a whole universe of beliefs, relations, interests, ideologies and institutions that are expressed through their action. Social actors are undoubtedly shaped and incorporated in a context of structural constraints; that does not mean, however, that the interpretation of their action should be so structurally overdetermined, leading to the annihilation and deactivation of the historicity of their everyday actions in Durkheimian terms.

According to Dimitriou, "every act of human beings entails control, planning, emotion and decision. The fact that they act guided by social models and always in direct or indirect relations with others, that is, through the social structures, makes them invest these relations with the result of their actions and choices" (Dimitriou 1996). Besides, this is precisely why innovative adaptation as Bauman would put it (Bauman 1999) has always been the skill of the powerless. In this context, the Gramscian concept of consent explains partially, in my view, the reasons for which they are placed in such a framework. Agents are involved in power relations, either because this practice has a minimal cost in whatever form or because they expect to use them in the long-run for their own benefit (Dimitriou 1996). To the extent that the oppressive rules have an ambiguous character and are historically differentiated (Silverman 1974), they enhance agents to handle the conditions they are embedded in skillfully and to multiply the possibilities of using their restrictive dimensions every time, depending on the position they hold in the social hierarchy system. These possibilities are increased in periods of serious crises and transitions as the action structures are reframed and social change is re-regulated.

For instance, while before the current economic recession several workers were employed in the local labor market, in the last few years they have started being recruited increasingly in working crews which are employed while the ship is on high seas, a practice that in the local working idiom is called "*mission*". They travel all over the world, from the Mediterranean Sea, to Liverpool, to Gdansk, to the Baltic Sea, completing a particularly dangerous task and offering incredibly profitable services. The working conditions are totally uncontrolled and the wages are twice as much as offered on land since there are no indirect payments and social insurance stamps are not included in the oral contracts. Most of these jobs are dealt orally and are performed within a silence "conspiracy" and complicity. It is therefore very probable that a metalworker will accept this employment regime since his work prospects on land are very limited.

The concept of consent possibly explains the occasional and performative acceptance of particular coercive structures which if seen through a common sense perspective seem to be an un-

avoidable reality. However, it perceives agents as passively receiving the existing structures, limiting the horizon of interpretation of social change, supporting the view that the structures of the industrial society are imposed through the rules of the dominant ideology and the incorporation of the dominant culture, mainly at an everyday level. This case, however, gave me the opportunity to realize that although people enter into hierarchical games in a seemingly passive way they conceive of it as negotiation of their Self and purposeful manipulation of the available possibilities for the improvement of their existence. I believe that what appears to be consent needs to be examined within the framework of conscious decision making which is the result both of actual material conditions of existence and of a definition of interests as they are determined by the asymmetrical relationships between dominant and dominated.

This concept, in addition, presupposes that everyday action is a spiritless and substantially a-historical routine, as well as that agents are absolutely passive beings, in Parsonian terms. But this fact ostracizes, *de facto*, human activity beyond history, as if one would expect its accompanying creativity to emerge only in supposed "critical" historical (with a capital H) facts scorning everyday life which is swarming with clashes, contradictions and reconceptualizations, that is domains that compose mnemonic experiences and means creating collective memory. Human action is integrated in a variety of structural areas in multiple contexts in social, political and economic terms negotiating and attempting selectively to foretell, depending on the structured context where it unfolds, its aim.

The ethnographic data which have been briefly presented, shows that social action is heterogenic, polysemantic and inventive in a context of high inequality. Workers are using locally the institutions through which they have learnt to live and, depending on the context, they develop particular strategies selecting from them a series of possibilities and ideological principles. In this sense the important question which must be answered is not whether consent as such exists but which dominant group attempts to impose it and on whose profit.

## 5. Conclusion

**I**n this context the above mentioned practices are perceived as unlawful and informal by the formal political technology. This takes place to the extent that agents, in the micro-level of everyday action, earn their living using the "space" created as the result of the clash between the dominant groups which possess the economic and political power and the culture of everyday resistance of the dominated through their conscious engagement in this asymmetrical power game and management of social reproduction.

In this condition, the semantics of deviation, of the unlawful practices and of the informal activities, stand for a conceptual disciplining mechanism, from the perspective of the dominant ideology aiming at ensuring consent and asymmetrical social relations. These, however, from the agents' point of view potentially express mediocre assent, latent opposition, evident hostility (Godelier, 1978, 767) or even conscious negotiation. Otherwise the modes of discipline imposition of the "microphysics of power" (Foucault 1991), wouldn't be intensified nor would they be "modernized", they wouldn't even exist. For instance, is it a coincidence that in the current period of the high technological improvement, the economic crisis and the further flexibilization of work and the consequent socio-economic changes (Vaiou, Labrianides, Chatzimichalis, Chronaki, 1993, 101) accelerate the process of social inequality and expand the domain of informal economy?

It is, therefore, in this context that workers constitute active agents whose practices structure and are structured by a power system. This is extremely coercive to the degree that agents are

aware of the fact that it is necessary for them to be disciplined by the power relations imposed from the local model of capitalist production. Being aware of these relations they become their bearers as they manage their personal experience and attempt to maneuver them selectively in order to control, to the degree that it is possible, the circumstances of inequality and to improve the conditions of their life in the context of accumulated employment experience in the area.

## Notes

1. A slightly modified version of this paper will be published in the volume edited by S.Narotzky and V.Goddard titled, "Work and Livelihoods-History, Ethnography and Models in Times of Crisis" which is currently under review by the publishers, Routledge, Taylor and Francis Group.
2. The notion of subcontracting is extremely chaotic and ambiguous for its nature changes across time and place. In general terms one could define it as a form of employment relation which brings two enterprises together for the accomplishment of a specific productive outcome or for a service provision. According to Holmes, there are, broadly, three subcontracting categories: capacity subcontracting, specialization subcontracting and supplier subcontracting (Holmes 1986).
3. A typical example is the closing down of many textile industries previously located in Piraeus as well as many small-scale shipbuilding and repairing industrial units, fertilizer, plastic and metalwork plants, flourmills and smelters (Trade Union of Piraeus 1995).
4. An important role in this plays the fluctuations and demands of the market which are not easy to be managed. According to a reply document of the Piraeus Shipbuilders' Association to the Ministry of Development, regarding the constitution of a ship constructors' record in the region, the following dimensions stressed are characteristic of the situation: "A basic fact has not been considered, that the small-scale enterprises which we represent are businesses which act periodically and not continuously. And this is due to the fact that repairing a ship is not a stable production process, since the ships are not always in need for repair, neither they are constantly being constructed. Our companies, when there are no active repair contracts, are not operating, are not active, and are not employing workers. When they are active, in specific periods of time, they employ workers with a fixed-term employment contract. The workers' union has repeatedly stated that the workers in the zone area have the opportunity to earn 100 up to 150 number of day wages per year. It is not possible, therefore, to be able to employ with an open-ended work contract workers, since that would not allow us to continue our operation and, in any case, is not consistent with the nature of our activity" (Piraeus Shipbuilders' Association 1997).
5. For a more detailed account on the issue, see also Spyridakis 2006.
6. It is the name of business in the local idiom.
7. The enterprises in the area operate mainly within the context of the subcontracting system in order to recruit the local labour workforce. This system relies heavily upon extended social networks through which information about employment availability is diffused throughout the region. The information circulates among workers and coincides to a great extent with the local social process of work. The local informal system of production is at the same time part and parcel of the local social relationships and of the network within which they are embedded. The informal aspect of employment relationships structures the ways through which the information is spread out, that is, within a silent and secret framework, a "conspiracy of silence" (Vaiou – Chatzimichalis, 1997, 64). Subcontracting relies heavily on this kind of recruitment in order to minimize

- labour costs. This explains why it is in the interest of local businessmen to create locally a large web of acquaintances and "connections" in order to have alternative sources of labour available.
8. In this line of argument Narotzky referring to Spain, stresses that "the dominant model of economic development now incorporates the importance of "noneconomic" social relations that are deemed increasingly necessary for the local establishment of dynamic entrepreneurial practices and flexible relations of production" (Narotzky, 2004, 57).
  9. Here as Pardo puts it lies a significant challenge to anthropological research, that is to reveal the differences between what the agents say and actually do in the private and public realm of their lives, as well as between values and interests, while defining the demands which set in motion the formulation process of these sociological poles, differences which encourage flexibility and ambiguity when attempting to define the concept of orderliness. These differences potentially create vague meanings, because they are complex and are intersected by complex frames of thinking and perception, politics, religion, gender, etc. (Pardo, 2000, 3).
  10. For a similar case referring to the way the combination of capitalist subcontracting, state welfare, and economic policies of local regeneration in England has increased the informalization and casualization of labour, see Mollona 2005.
  11. Antonio Gramsci argues that syndicalism is but a form of the capitalist society and not a potential for surpassing it; he also claims that organizing workers, not as producers, but as wagers, leads them to the status of economic individualization (Gramsci, 2002, 90).
  12. For Bourdieu workers are represented by individuals who have acquired the "power of speech" talking on behalf of a collectivity which reductively is called class. Precisely due to that reduction he calls the resultant from the theory, particularly the Marxist theory, collectivities, "classes on paper" stressing that the identities and the consciousness are not only defined by the economic factor. But this reductionism has a practical impact as well, as the political representatives of the "classes" in the mechanisms of the work syndicates have a vital interest to believe that the "classes on paper" reflect the social structure and to spread this belief of theirs both to their supporters and to those off the limits of this mechanism (Bourdieu, 1991, 204-205).
  13. Anthony, referring to the case of England claims that, "the collective bargaining relationship is a market relationship and trade unions engaged in it are committed to market behavior. This is why trade unions cannot make any contribution to an ideological exchange, at least within their economic and industrial role. The British trade unions have never engaged in an ideological examination of the society in which they operate because the contradictory conceptual framework on which they are founded forbids it. British trade unions, on the contrary, usually regard any emerging ideology within its own ranks as an incipient revolt against their own authority; the normal reaction of a British trade union to a developing ideology is to put it down" (Anthony, 1977, 180).
  14. According to Pardo, given that the definition of what is informal or illegal is a social process, the categorization of such activities as unlawful means that it is not taken into consideration that their moral legality is the result of the processually redefined moral and spiritual values of the agents, of their entrepreneurship and of their understanding of the official law as well as of power (legal or illegal) in general (Pardo, 1995, 47).

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