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Introductory note to the Special Issue “Work in the aftermath of the global economic crisis: new spaces and types of work emerging in cities of recession”

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Introductory note to the Special Issue

“Work in the aftermath of the global economic crisis: new spaces and types of work emerging in cities of recession”

Economic crisis, as always, means a crisis of the urban environment, of the city. Although the “economy”, in general, is not inherently “urban”, its modal shifts almost invariably affect the dynamics of cities. The basic question concerning this volume is which types of socio-spatial arrangements emerge from economic re-organization in specific urban contexts. Therefore, the objective of this issue is to present empirical studies and theoretical concepts on the contemporary transformation of urban work landscapes. Research on labour processes in urban systems has mainly developed in the framework of employer-employee relations and their spatial pattern. In the new era of ICT however, work is increasingly organised outside the conventional employer-employee context as a growing number of people hold multiple jobs and work in multiple places under flexible conditions. Urban landscapes of work are accordingly reshaped by new labour processes and employment practices taking place in other-than-the-conventional spaces (own homes, co-working hubs, etc.)

The interest in new practices and places of work in cities and their consequences for urban space is relatively recent in urban studies. The transformation of conventional work spaces is tightly related to global processes of labour restructuring through the digitalisation of economic activity and the flexibilisation of employment as illustrated in the fast increasing rates of independent workers in the EU labour market (Leighton 2015). Optimistic views have stressed the opportunities offered by work digitalisation for better work-and-life balance, for innovation and creativity through unlimited access to global resources and networks. The proliferation of new spaces for creative independent or/and collaborative work in many cities of the global North has also initiated “gentrification” processes in declining areas of obsolete land uses (former docks, warehouses, industrial buildings, etc.) and generated new values through urban renovation.

On the other hand, empirical evidence has however revealed that digitalisation has led to labour intensification by extending work beyond fixed locations and standard times. The growing scale of the “gig economy” in the digital realm has affirmed this fact and raised

debates on highly precarious employment and the prevalence of informal over formal work and work places (Burchell et al., 2014). Indeed, new forms of work are predominantly casual or project-based self-employment. From this point of view, new unconventional working spaces are regarded as ‘enclaves of shadow economy’ (Avdikos and Kalogeresis, 2016) providing access to affordable professional base (Lavanga et al., current issue). As put in another way, flexible workplaces tend to reproduce precarious working conditions and highly individualized ways of navigating within the labour market (Gandini, 2016; Papageorgiou, current issue).

In this issue we seek to link the emerging spaces and landscapes of work to the 2008 global financial crisis and the ensuing restructuring process of labour markets and urban economies. In Greece, the economic shock of sovereign debt and austerity measures resulted to massive closures of small and medium-sized enterprises, the backbone of the Greek economy, and to consequent loss of hundreds thousands of jobs. At the same time, the institutional deregulation of labour and social security further aggravated urban poverty and un/under-employment, particularly for the young educated people who enter the labour market for the first time. In this context, flexible/atypical workplaces – i.e. co-working spaces, hubs, start-ups, etc.– have proliferated through bottom-to-top individual or collective initiatives (Papageorgiou, current issue).

Athens, among other southern European capital cities hit by acute austerity and prolonged recession, serves as an appropriate terrain to explore the reconfiguration of labour processes, work practices and places in urban space. The pursuit of employment in a declining or stagnant labour market and the large stock of abandoned offices and shops in the historic and commercial centre of Greece’s capital city had defined for nearly a decade the urban economic landscape. Hubs, accelerators, co-working spaces and start-ups, all flourished in downtown Athens in the aftermath of the crisis. The ongoing urban revitalisation is attributed to space qualities encompassing symbolic and cultural values, as well as social (local networks) and physical (building and location) elements (Lavanga et al., Koutsari and Demertzi, current issue).

The emergence of new economic activities, new forms of work and employment patterns, and new land uses in the city are identified in the following:

- the rise of micro-entrepreneurialism in local markets (driven rather by unemployment and precarity than by opportunity), in the form of street-level “conventional” micro-enterprises in traditional market sectors or crisis-ignited business initiatives in the social and solidarity economy (Koukoufikis, current issue);

- the resilience of migrant entrepreneurship in central areas of Athens and the revitalisation of declining neighbourhoods by migrant artisanship and speciality retail due to the increase of refugee inflows since 2015 (Polyzou, current issue);
- the flourishing of creative entrepreneurship in areas of strong cultural identity and cooperative schemes such as innovation hubs, start-ups and co-working spaces, although threatened today by extensive residential “touristification” in neighbourhoods of the historic city centre (Lavanga et al, Koutsari and Demertzi, current issue);
- the mutation or decline of traditional craftsmanship and related small-scale business activities, due to the rise of new creative and culturally upgraded activities as well as “touristification” (Koutsari and Demertzi, Vavva, current issue).

Overall, the original papers presented in this volume compose a valuable body of empirical research and theoretical debate on some of the most interesting dimensions intersecting the urban economy and society.

This Special Issue was initiated by the Seminar Series on “*Reconceptualising Urban Landscapes of Work*”, funded by the Urban Studies Foundation during 2017-2018 under the scientific co-ordination of *Dr Darja Reuschke, Associate Professor in Human Geography at the University of Southampton, UK*. The aim was to address the spatial implications of ongoing contractual and temporal changes of work (employment flexibility and precariousness, new forms of labour etc.). The third and final Seminar in the Series was proposed by *Dr Maria Tsampra* and co-hosted with the collaboration of *Dr Alex Afouxenidis* on the 8-9 February 2018 in Athens at the National Centre for Social Research. The Seminar’s particular focus was on the impact of the global crisis on the reconfiguration of urban economies in southern Europe. It has been our pleasure to organize the Seminar and to put together this collection of articles and we would like to thank Darja for her support as well as the Urban Studies Foundation for their help and assistance. We would also like to extend our sincere thanks to the numerous participants of the Seminar and especially to the authors of this issue.

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