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The role of micro-enterprises in post-growth urban transitions:

An inquiry in Athens and Barcelona

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#### ABSTRACT

*This paper brings forward empirical research assessing the potential influence of micro-enterprises to urban post-growth systemic transformations. Athens and Barcelona used as urban laboratories to document the factors (discursive, structural, and institutional) that influenced micro-entrepreneurial adaptation strategies to the post-2008 crisis and thus to discover to what extent the altered discourses and practices of this agency exhibit potential to stimulate wider socio-economic transformations. The field engagement targeted “conventional” micro-enterprises, operating at street-level in traditional market sectors and micro-enterprises operating in the social and solidarity economy. The results indicate that the crisis indeed provided context for path-shaping processes towards alternative urban economic realities in which this particular agency has an important role to play. However, for a transformative process to capitalize, further empowerment, institutional framing and material support needed along with the activation of other types of collective and individual agencies.*

*Keywords: post-growth development, post-growth city, urban studies, social and solidarity economy, micro-enterprises, Athens, Barcelona, crisis*

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#### ΠΕΡΙΛΗΨΗ

*Το παρόν άρθρο αποτελεί μια εμπειρική έρευνα που αξιολογεί τον ρόλο και την πιθανή επίδραση των μικροεπιχειρήσεων ως προς τον μετασχηματισμό των αστικών κοινωνικοοικονομικών συστημάτων στην κατεύθυνση της μετανάπτυξης. Η έρευνα πεδίου απευθύνθηκε σε «συμβατικές» πολύ μικρές επιχειρήσεις, οι οποίες λειτουργούν σε παραδοσιακούς τομείς της αγοράς και σε επιχειρήσεις που δραστηριοποιούνται στην κοινωνική και αλληλέγγυα οικονομία. Η Αθήνα και η Βαρκελώνη χρησιμοποιήθηκαν ως πόλεις-εργαστήρια για να τεκμηριώσουν τους παράγοντες που επηρέασαν τις στρατηγικές μικροεπιχειρηματικής προσαρμογής στην οικονομική κρίση μετά το 2008, ώστε να ερευνηθεί σε ποιο βαθμό οι αφηγήσεις και οι πρακτικές αυτών μπορούν να αποτελέσουν ένδειξη ροπής προς έναν ευρύτερο κοινωνικοοικονομικό μετασχηματισμό. Τα αποτελέσματα δείχνουν ότι η κρίση και το αστικό περιβάλλον παρείχε ένα πλαίσιο για διαδικασίες διαμόρφωσης εναλλακτικών οικονομικών πρακτικών, στις οποίες οι μικροεπιχειρήσεις διαδραματίζουν σημαντικό ρόλο. Ωστόσο, για την κεφαλαιοποίηση και ενίσχυση της μετασχηματιστικής διαδικασίας, χρειάζεται κατάλληλο θεσμικό πλαίσιο και υλική υποστήριξη για την ενεργοποίηση περαιτέρω συλλογικών και ατομικών δράσεων.*

*Λέξεις-κλειδιά: Μετανάπτυξη, Πόλη, Αστικές Μελέτες, Κοινωνική και Αλληλέγγυα Οικονομία, Μικροεπιχειρήσεις, Αθήνα, Βαρκελώνη, Κρίση*

## INTRODUCTION

Over the last decade, a heterodox socio-ecological “growth-critique” literature has gained discursive space within the sustainability debates. This line of thought argues that in order to avoid ecological collapse a deep structural socio-economic and socio-cultural shift towards a smaller but socially just and environmentally sustainable economy is needed (Daly, 1995; Jackson, 2011; Kallis et al., 2012; Paech, 2012; Spash, 2013). In those critical reflections, the role of economic growth, as measured in units of production of material and financial assets is questioned, thus challenging directly the accumulative capitalist mode of development and the architecture of all contemporary socio-economic and financial structures in our society. The dominance of contemporary neoliberal capitalism and its institutions leave little room to imagine how a transition to a post-growth society can materialise. In this paper, given the importance of cities in theoretical reflections regarding post-growth systemic economic transformation (see Koukoufikis and Moulaert, 2018) I seek to investigate and document if spontaneous post-growth transformative dynamics can emerge at the urban level. To this purpose, the characteristics and evolution of small-scale entrepreneurship after the socio-economic crisis of 2008 are examined in two European Mediterranean cities, Athens and Barcelona. The paper investigates to what extent in the two cities the crisis created structural pressure altering the discourses and material practices of micro-entrepreneurs, if those correspond to expectations deriving from matching post-growth theories, and thus if this agency can be considered as a driver for a potentially systemic transformation towards alternative urban socio-economic development trajectories.

The understanding of the conditions under which an agency spontaneously or strategically alters its behaviour, as well as the implications deriving from this, are of particular importance. In analytical frameworks of urban and regional socio-economic development, social structures are seen as products of institutionalized and path-dependent collective agency (Moulaert et al., 2016). Individual agency is discursively and materially reproduced but can also be transformed in a given spatio-temporal setting, thus holding path-shaping transformative power for the collective (Moulaert et al., 2016). The agency of micro-enterprises with its significant socio-economic role in the everyday functioning of urban economies becomes of particular importance for analysing transformations in urban socio-economic systems. Among the diverse agents of the urban realm that can facilitate (or prevent) an urban system to move from its post-industrial to the post-growth phase, the micro-enterprise was selected as an analytical focus since its agency reflects the diversity in

socio-economic adaptation strategies to the socio-economic and environmental milieu under a context of crisis and economic depression. A crisis creates structural pressure for changes in the institutional settings and business practices of traditional street-level micro-enterprises; while generates discursive re-articulation reflected on the formation or strengthening of the socially responsible entrepreneurial sector (mainly social enterprises and small cooperatives) that on itself alters behavioural patterns of the micro-entrepreneurial strata as a whole.

These reflections take place through a prism of a heterodox amalgam of concepts and relations finding inspiration in both business and urban studies, and growth-critique scholars cum ecological sustainability analysis. To guarantee coherence within this amalgamation, one should acknowledge the diverse meanings of cross-disciplinarily used concepts that even if similar, yet utilize different vocabularies. The focus on a particular agency that vitally operates and shapes cities, namely the micro-enterprise, offers an opportunity for pursuing conceptual clarity. The analytical task to strengthen the heterodox perspectives in business studies, in parallel with integrating insights from business economics into urban studies, is far from easy. The field of urban studies largely embraced the cultural turn in social sciences. Scholars adhering to alternative thinking often have a tendency to ignore market dynamics and agencies or confine themselves to the analysis of culture and power relations, thus leaving the door wide open for the so-called mainstream analytical scientific tradition when it comes to the analysis of microeconomic agents. Furthermore, business studies influenced by the mainstream economic traditions do not sufficiently engage with inquiries on socio-ecological transformations. As Hall et al. (2010) noted, addressing sustainable development in mainstream entrepreneurship literature is sparse and comes usually through a prescriptive and not a descriptive-analytical prism. This refers to the “Panacea Hypothesis” deriving from mainstream political economy approaches to sustainability, where it is believed that market forces expressed through green entrepreneurship are able to provide solutions to ecological questions (Ostrom et al., 2007).

In order to cross the disciplinary and conceptual boundaries, the first section of this paper sets the framework for this research explaining why the agency of micro-enterprises is crucial for studying urban post-growth dynamics. The second section looks into the sociological strata of the contemporary micro-entrepreneurs in order to provide class and cultural explanations behind the decision of avoiding waged labour by either operating a small enterprise in the conventional market or in the Social and Solidarity Economy (SSE). In the third section, the case-cities and methods of inquiry presented. The fourth and fifth sections present the results of the field research and the data analysis of micro-enterprises

operating both in the conventional and in the SSE markets looking for possible associations with emerging patterns of economic activities beyond growth-centred development. Finally, an extensive discussion section provides a reflection on the findings, the limitations and expectations of such emerging dynamics.

## 1. POST-GROWTH FUTURES, SPATIAL ANALYSIS AND THE MICRO-ENTERPRISE

After the 1970s, throughout the industrialized world, changes in the industrial structure and high levels of unemployment caused a dynamic shift towards smaller organizational forms of firms. Small and medium-sized firms increased their numbers and became the main agents generating employment (Landstrom, 2007). Today micro-enterprises<sup>1</sup> constitute the largest part of business units in actual numbers (usually above 90% in most countries). Yet their role in urban and socio-ecological studies is rarely discussed. This agency could be analysed within a spatial and socio-ecological studies framework that focuses on the plurality and justness of economic activities which confront market logic with a community ontology for spatial analysis (Laville, 2014; Moulaert and Nussbaumer, 2005). A community ontology favours increased democratic control, local self-sufficiency, reduction of unequal distribution of wealth and income, and the alteration of dominant power structures (Moulaert and Nussbaumer, 2005). In today's globalized capitalism, small-business structures operating in local market economies can find room in this ontology. The plurality of micro-entrepreneurial actors assists the wider and evener distribution of income instead of fewer large firms providing wage labour reinforcing unequal accumulation. Though still operating in a capitalist market, the community-bounded nature of micro-enterprises structured around family and the dependence of their operation and survival on reciprocal networks creates a more cohesive locality. Thus, helps to build a still exclusive but slightly more egalitarian local market economy.

Business studies explain differences in entrepreneurial approaches by distinguishing various owner typologies from large-scale entrepreneurs to small business owners based on their motives and aspirations. Dunkelberg and Cooper (1982) investigated the motives behind the establishment of small enterprises, recognising three types of entrepreneurs: the ones that are growth-oriented seeking profitability; the ones seeking independency since they do not

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<sup>1</sup> In business studies and the Anglophone world, the words 'enterprise' and 'business' are used interchangeably to describe organized entities generating economic activity. In this paper, the term enterprise is favoured unless referring to passages quoted in other scholars' work that opt for the term business.

wish to work for others, and the ones wishing to exercise their particular artisanship or profession. Similarly, Carland et al. (as cited in Landstrom, 2007) argued that it is important to differentiate between an entrepreneur and a small business owner (p. 358):

*“An entrepreneur is an individual who establishes and manages a business for the principal purposes of profit and growth. The entrepreneur is characterized principally by innovative behaviour and will employ strategic management practices in the business. A small business owner is an individual who establishes and manages a business for the principal purpose of furthering personal goals. The business must be the primary sources of income and will consume the majority of one’s time and resources. The owner perceives the business as an extension of his or her personality, intricately bound with family needs and desires.”*

Hornaday’s (1990) owner typology for small business research further stresses fundamental differences in the intentions and motives of small-business owners and entrepreneurs. While managers behind large enterprises are following growth and profit maximization logics, many small business owners limit growth and want to achieve personal goals instead (Hornaday, 1990). Moreover, entrepreneurs as their level of awareness on the dangers of the local natural and communal environment increases, become keener to discover and apply sustainable business practices (Patzelt and Shepherd, 2011).

Post-growth economic theories prioritize the social and environmental aspects engulfing the economic (Johnsen et al., 2017) thus, given the above, micro-enterprises could be in the centre of analytical and research inquiries of growth-critique scholars. Yet their role and properties are only remotely addressed in the post-growth literature, though some scholars often acknowledge their importance (Speth, 2008; Johanisova, 2013). Heinberg (2011) refers to the potential transitional power held in local economic ecosystems and strategies towards community development based on small-scale co-ops, micro-enterprises and not-for-profit organizations. Parker (as cited in Johnsen, 2017, pp. 6-7) argues in favour of a view that disconnects entrepreneurship from purely economic phenomena and stresses its potential to bring about *“social transformation through its social creative nature”*. Similarly, Simms and Johnson (2010) see the transition potential of entrepreneurialism through cooperatives, associations, publicly owned companies, and social enterprises, given their diverse forms of governance and their aim to operate beyond the mere goal of maximizing profit returns.

## 2. THE CLASS IDENTITY AND CULTURE OF MICRO-ENTREPRENEURS

Class relations and the labour market have undergone a significant transformation in post-industrial societies, along with our understanding of social stratification in contemporary capitalism. Sociological research on micro-entrepreneurialism and small business owners – even if limited – has been heavily influenced by class reductionist sociological approaches, mainly by Marxist and Weberian scholars identifying them as part of the petit-bourgeois class, hence being part of capitalist reproductive mechanisms of social relations, enhancing a laissez-faire ideological basis (Curran and Burrows, 1986). For the advanced globalized capitalism of the 21st century, these approaches seem rather one-dimensional. The dominant type of micro-enterprise operating on the typical traditional market is usually a family-run or personal small enterprise that provides direct employment and income to its members. In other words, it represents a type of subsistence entrepreneurialism, the urban equivalent of the subsistence agriculture living mode that dominates rural societies for centuries. As one of the interviewed scholars framed it referring to micro-enterprises of the agro-food sector in Athens:

*“I believe that the nano-enterprise, the micro-enterprise does not represent the hard face of capitalism, it is not like a big multinational supermarket. Micro-entrepreneurs are people who are either threatened by unemployment or became unemployed at some point and they had skills trying to set up and operate a business in order to survive. They offer a lot on the local consumption – production system. They are a special social group, not working in a neoclassical sense to maximize profits but to survive for the next five years, in order to have a decent income, working with fair profit margins. And many thought that they feel empowered since they govern their own fate and take decisions themselves” (Interview, A.1).<sup>2</sup>*

Indeed, Bechhofer and Elliott (1981) pointed out that the classification of micro-entrepreneurs is hard since they are neither “*bourgeois nor proletarians*” (1981, p. 182) given their diversity, their particular social relations and the small property (intellectual or material) they possess. This particular social group is neither fully subordinated nor superior to power relations, neither unprotected nor safe from market and state forces; its composition, its economic function and interest change through the evolution of capitalism in time and space (Bechhofer and Elliott, 1981).

Gorz (1997) and his analysis on the role and dilemmas faced by labourers in post-

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<sup>2</sup> When information in a section provided by an interviewee a coded reference is used indicating the city where the interview took place (A. for Athens, B. for Barcelona). When direct quotation is used, it appears in *italics* within quotation marks.

industrial societies with a lower-middle or working-class background offer further insight. He argues that the nature of contemporary work shaped by the capitalist division of labour and the increasingly precarious working conditions creates a class-less social group. This group had lost its ability to identify the contribution of its labour in the production process and its negotiating power against capital. As he notes:

*“The neo-proletariat is generally overqualified for the jobs it finds. It is generally condemned to under-use of its capacities when it is at work, and to underemployment itself in the longer term. Any employment seems to be accidental and provisional, every type of work purely contingent. It cannot feel any involvement with 'its' work or identification with 'its' job. Work no longer signifies an activity or even a major occupation; it is merely a blank interval on the margins of life, to be endured in order to earn a little money”* (Gorz, 1997, pp. 69-70).

As Gorz sees it, the “non-class” has nothing to expect from contemporary capitalism, sees no future; nevertheless, this free-subjectivity can be a force of significant individual action. Under this premise, individual rather than collective strategies are often mobilized to pursue a better life and the emancipatory potential of entrepreneurialism is one of them. The assumption here is that this social group fuels the ranks of contemporary micro-entrepreneurs in post-industrial societies. By establishing a micro-enterprise, members of this non-class can feel that they contribute individually to the collective production of society, meanwhile gaining individual power.

Indeed, an increasing number of people choose or are forced to take this step. The lower entry barriers like access to credit and educational attainment allowed the previous decades micro-entrepreneurial schemes to flourish. In the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century in Europe, 58% of the new employment growth was due to new micro-enterprises (De Kok et al., 2011). In business studies, drivers that have become the decisional factors behind starting and operating an enterprise are considered either, a good business opportunity and the capacity to grasp it, or existential/social needs pressing for action (Block and Sandner, 2009). Especially in a context of economic crisis when the opportunities for social mobility are lower, needs-driven entrepreneurialism is on the rise. Through micro-entrepreneurship, labourers may seek a solution to their underemployment and a credible narrative of emancipation. Data-driven research on self-employment as a dominant type of micro-entrepreneurship indicates that socio-psychological dissatisfaction with life increases self-employment rates (Noorderhaven, Thurik, Wennekers, and Stel, 2004). Certainly, the most marginalized groups or the lowest class will not be able to become conventional

entrepreneurs, due to the lack of material and/or relational capital. However, special social entrepreneurship and cooperative schemes may allow their inclusion in economic life. In fact, responses to social problems and mainly the one of unemployment through self-organization of labour were a common practice throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century (Laville, 2014).

### 3. RESEARCHING MICRO-ENTREPRENEURISM IN RELATION TO URBAN POST-GROWTH TRANSFORMATIONS

Micro-entrepreneurs and self-employed holding small intellectual and/or material capital develop common sets of values, institutions and symbols depending on their surrounding economic and institutional environment (Bechhofer and Elliott, 1981). In order to investigate if these groups hold transformative potential for a given urban system facing structural pressure, field research took place in Athens and Barcelona; both Mediterranean cities that share development and economic imaginaries, identities and subjectivities. There the post-2008 economic reality consisted of an altered political and socio-economic setting. Negative or slow growth economies triggered resulting in a downward spiral of socio-economic problems and increased insecurity among the micro-entrepreneurs and labour force. Aiming for a holistic understanding of the micro-enterprise agency and its dynamic behaviour related to post-growth practices, two three-month field research visits took place in Athens (January to March 2017) and Barcelona (April to June 2017) for primary data collection. There, the focus was on two distinguished groups of micro-enterprises that operate in those cities and were subjects of separate analysis: (1) the street-level micro-enterprises that operate in the traditional markets of the cities (small retail shops, artisans, small craft production or service providers etc.), usually family or self-employed businesses; (2) and the “new” or re-emerging types of micro-enterprises, distinguished from the previous ones due to the type of internal organization and their goals (mainly small-scale cooperatives and social enterprises) operating in the so-called Social and Solidarity Economy. The aim is to identify whether these existing or new micro-entrepreneurial projects in the conventional and the SSE have spontaneously or strategically developed counter-hegemonic discourses and material business practices fitting in the broader post-growth transformative economic agenda.

For the selection of micro-enterprises that operate in the conventional street-level market economy, the geographical focus areas were mixed-use neighbourhoods where residential and retail uses traditionally coexisted in core districts of the two cities. The aim was to examine a cross-sectoral selection that includes agents operating in everyday economic activities of the city: retail shops, offering consumable goods, durable goods and

food products; service providers (childcare, accounting businesses, etc.); small-scale workshops and light-industries (handicraft production etc.). The tool of acquiring data for those was questionnaire-based micro-interviews with different types of closed and open answer questions allowing self-expression on key issues. It combined crisis-related inquiries, to assess if altering business practices are crisis-driven and questions aiming to identify the entrepreneurs' interest, attitude and level of awareness in alternative economic and sustainable practices. The survey included a profiling section and the random sample size was 50 owners (managers) for each city.

The method of data collection for the second group of micro-enterprises that operates in the SSE (mainly small-scale cooperatives and social economy enterprises) consisted of in-depth semi-structured interviews. The purpose was the identification of more conscious applications of alternative practises, discourses and strategies in reaction to the crisis. The sample consisted of interviews with twelve owners/managers (six in each city) of SSE micro-enterprises and seven local experts (four in Athens and three in Barcelona), academics, representatives of cooperatives and small business confederations, and municipal agencies. Their initial identification and selection was made after a desk-research mapping significant initiatives and actors in the field, and in a later stage after chain-referral and updated observations build up during the field research. The conversation built up around the profile, motives, and goals of micro-entrepreneurs, info on the general climate in the social and collaborative economy initiatives, the connection between practices and aspirations, the role of the crisis in their personal motives and in advancing a progressive entrepreneurial ecosystem and the presence of support from public bodies and networks. In the interviews with local experts, the discussion was focused on the challenges and opportunities the crisis created for the ecosystem of small enterprises, the increasing presence of collaborative/social economy networks in the cities and the effects of the changes on the local institutional and political framework. The following sections present the results utilizing a single narrative technique by combining the various data collection tools and aggregating the findings from both cities.

#### 4. THE STREET LEVEL MICRO-ENTREPRENEURIAL RESPONSES TO STRUCTURAL PRESSURE

The statistical definition of micro-enterprise of the European Union includes businesses that employ less than 10 workers and have an annual turnover of less than €2million. In Greece, 96,9% of the total enterprises belonging to this category and employ 68% of the total labour

force while more than one-third of them are operating in the wider metropolitan area of Athens (ACT, 2015; EY, 2017). In the post-2008 crisis era, reduced demand and liquidity problems accompanied by very limited access to credit created a severe economic climate for those (SEI, 2013). Indeed Greek and Spanish small and medium-size enterprises faced the greatest problem of accessing credit among all the other European countries which forced many of those to close down. In Greece, between 2008-2014, the total number of micro-enterprises fell by 20.9% (EY, 2017), while in Barcelona, where 88.5% of the enterprises are micro-enterprises, during the same period their numbers reduced by approximately 6.5% with the remaining ones facing constant stress for survival.<sup>3</sup> As reported in a country-wide survey of 2014, across Greece almost half of small-enterprises (47.8%) foresaw an imminent risk of closure within the next six months (SEI, 2014).

In such a context, the micro-enterprises discourse and material practise alteration is expressed in changing business models and practices so to adapt and survive in the new socio-economic reality. This research investigated whether in this context the surveyed micro-enterprises altered their agency towards a behaviour that fit “post-growth” theoretical elaborations; while assessing if the observed changes can hold the capacity for path-shaping processes potentially leading to a collective (structural) transformation of the urban socio-economic system.

In both Athens and Barcelona most of the surveyed street-level enterprises (>90%) were either, sole-enterprises, family-run, or owned by only two partners and report a yearly net income of less than €20.000 per year.<sup>4</sup> More than 65% were established before the global crisis affected the local markets (2009-2010) while in the vast majority of them, the owners and family members are the only employed.

During the 2014-2017 period, only 15% experienced economic growth while the rest saw their growth rates decrease or remain relatively stable. The majority of the micro-entrepreneurs stated that the crisis created a negative or extremely negative impact on their business function and nine out of ten indicated that surviving the crisis, not growth was the main business goal. This triggered a set of micro-entrepreneurial strategies and techniques to adapt and secure their business and jobs. The majority of those were quite conventional, aiming to boost demand by lowering prices and diversifying their range of products and services offered; or reducing the operational costs as much as possible. The main mode of

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<sup>3</sup> Author’s elaboration on data deriving from the statistical institute of Catalonia (Idescat), while there are no available up to date data on urban level for Athens.

<sup>4</sup> In the remaining part of this section, all data are primary and aggregated for both cities.

this cost-reduction was either decreasing the already limited employment (one fifth had to decrease their personnel) and/or increase the working hours for the owners-employees, resulting in self-exploitation.

In an effort to identify if in the post-crisis period any social, ecological and alternative economy sensitivities have been articulated through altered conventional business practices, indicators for five domains were chosen: (1) The collaboration with local or regional suppliers; (2) the participation in local business networks; (3) the interest in ecologically-friendly business practices; (4) the participation in solidarity actions for social groups in need; and (5) the participation on socio-political lobbies, professional associations etc. Those reveal forms of mediation between agency and institutionalization transformed due to structural change and can alter discourses and practices. In particular, the selected domains include what post-growth scholars use to describe the setting of local sustainable economies, such as increased local links of economic activities, strong bonds and networking among economic actors, and high social and ecological sensitivity.

What emerged from the responses is that from these five domains, the only one that showed strong signs of actual support was the re-localization of economic activities. Indeed, in a peculiar way, the crisis favoured shorten production and consumption cycles strengthening the local value chains. *“There is a revival of old local products and techniques. The crisis triggered a particular type of patriotism; we prefer local products and suppliers. You can see it in the emphasis on locality in advertising”* (Interview, A.1).

When it comes to the rest of the indicators, a slight increase of action towards social responsibility was tangible. Some micro-entrepreneurs stated that on a neighbourhood level they help people in need through offering reduced prices or free products and services while others take part in NGO’s or local government programmes that address social groups in need. Regarding cooperation, micro-entrepreneurs seem to be too busy with the day-to-day functioning of their enterprise to reflect and act on it. Clustering and cooperation building is not yet part of their culture even though agencies in both cities try to promote synergies (Interview A.2). Finally ecological and “greener” entrepreneurial practices are often described as a luxury; in times of cost-reduction, sustainable entrepreneurialism is a less attractive option for small enterprises.

2017 signalled a turning point for those local economies since macroeconomic data indicate that in that year those economies either started to enter in a recovery trajectory (Greece) or stabilized by bouncing back to 2008 levels (Spain). In an effort to identify the future motives and willingness and interest on alternative economy practices in a setting

characterized by more positive economic prospects in strict economic terms and the lessons learned from the past crisis, the micro-entrepreneurs were asked if in the near future they would be interested to take part in a (specific or general) set of actions that directly address aspects of alternative economies. Their answers (see Table 1.) indicate a general hesitation towards a divergence from a conventional market entrepreneurial logic. Again, as it was revealed by the previous set of indicators regarding their altered practices, they are attracted by solutions revealing an economic re-localization. Although they lack enthusiasm towards ethical and more eco-friendly business practices, they show interest in them. But when it comes to more specific or radical suggestions like entering an alternative currency network or changing the governing and organizational structure of their business to a cooperative, the disapproval becomes strong.

#### *A structural, institutional and discursive account*

The positions of the surveyed conventional micro-entrepreneurs reveal the role, limits and potentials of micro-enterprise agency in post-growth transformations. The micro-entrepreneurs in Athens and Barcelona portray a discursive reproduction of the mixed-class identity of the micro-enterprise owners as discussed in the previous section of this paper. During the crisis, micro-entrepreneurs can more easily position themselves as members of the lower-middle class or even the working class since their working hours and sense of insecurity increased, while on average the income from their entrepreneurial activities has remained relatively low. Their entrepreneurial choices seem almost completely dependent and affected by structural pressure created by the economic climate and the institutional setting they operate. Lowering operational costs seems to be the natural strategy mobilized to avoid a collapse affecting actions towards increased socio-environmental consciousness. Furthermore, the low levels of bottom-up collective empowering initiatives create an institutional dependency from top-down policies. The discourses and practices of many of those micro-entrepreneurs promoting shorter production-consumption cycles can be seen as the only main progressive outcome.

Table 1: *Aggregated responses of conventional micro-entrepreneurs from both cities on questions regarding future interest in non-conventional business practices*

Would you be interested in the near future to:	Extreme interest (1)	Big interest (2)	Moderate interest (3)	Slight interest (4)	No interest at all (5)	Mean
Take part in an alternative currency network	8%	6%	19%	23%	44%	3.58
Take part in a local business collaborative alliance	6%	13%	36%	19%	26%	3.46
Use exclusively local/regionally produced products/services	16%	36%	30%	5%	13%	2.57
Change the type of enterprise into a cooperative	1%	2%	9%	12%	76%	4.44
Introduce eco-friendly products or reduce the business ecological footprint	12%	24%	24%	19%	21%	3.15
Participate in an ethical/sustainable supply business' network	16%	20%	30%	15%	18%	3.02
Participate in movement for institutional & policy socio-economic change	10%	8%	29%	13%	40%	3.6

Source: Survey by author.

## 5. CAPITALIST CRISIS AND SOCIALLY RESPONSIBLE MICRO-ENTREPRENEURS: NURTURING POST-GROWTH ECONOMIC LANDSCAPES

Local economic practices reintroducing forms of economic cooperation and promoting cultural decolonization away from lifestyles that glorify consumerism and accumulation are qualities largely observed in the sphere of the social and cooperative economy. As such, social enterprises and cooperatives could be forms of firms' organization capable of creating adequate socio-economic structures on which post-growth economies to be based. As one of the interviewees simply stated: *"If you work with the cooperative principles you are very sensitive to the sustainability. People live where they work so they want to take care of their territory"* (Interview B.1). In the post-2008 Europe a revival of the interest on Social Economy (SE), a reinvention of cooperative practices and a proliferation of alternative economic agents took place. Such a revival though is not new. Historically capitalist crises set the ground for cycles of re-emergence of social-economic activities that offer solutions to human needs where the market and state fail to do so (Moulaert and Ailenei, 2005). What is

new though is the acknowledgement from local, national and supranational public authorities of the socio-economic importance of these types of economic organization. This creates a favourable condition for the operation of social and cooperative economy agents and could provide the base for their survivability, establishment, proliferation, and scale-up.

As Moulaert and Ailenei noted “*Social economy is so much embedded in historical, institutional and local contexts that it seems to escape generalisation*” (2005, p. 2049). Indeed this reality seems to create difficulties for a comprehensive understanding of the definition, the size and the sectors of interventions of the social and cooperative economy. The plurality of economic agents entailed in this reality includes small and large cooperatives, mutual societies, associations, foundations and increasingly alternative economic activities established under the statute of social enterprises. This broad set of economic agents blurs the visibility of the SSE. Indeed, the statistical records are hard to reconstruct and remain incomplete even if in many countries, and according to various sources, SSE accounts for 10% the employment generation (Campos and Avila, 2012). In Europe, public governing institutions and agencies at various spatial scales try to dissolve this statistical mist by establishing new statistical accounts, financing research projects, generating policy, deploy financial instruments, and legislation.

#### *Structural pressure and the institutionalization of SSE*

On state and local levels, the changes of the political and institutional settings favouring SSE and cooperatives have become visible through the creation of new legal frameworks and financial instruments providing assistance. Spain and Greece were among the first European countries that created, updated and strengthened SSE laws in 2011 (Campos and Avila, 2012). In Spain, the SSE Law passed on March 2011 (Law 5/2011 slightly revised in October 2015). It acknowledges the promotion, encouragement and development of SSE and its constituting organisations. The Law, even if received criticism as it remains generic, configures a legal framework that recognizes the SSE by defining its basic principles and offers visibility and greater legal security for its different entities. At the local level though, progressive government authorities (especially the ones linked to a social movement’s background that run many municipal councils including Barcelona’s since the 2015 elections) tried to boost various SSE initiatives in more active ways. In Barcelona, Barcelona en Comú, the left-leaning citizens' platform that governed the municipal council heavily invested human and financial resources in the promotion of alternative socio-economic policies (Interview, B.2). In 2015, a commission office was set up for the “Cooperative, Social and

Solidarity Economy’” drafting detailed municipal strategies and programmes that target SSE initiatives. A local action plan for 2016-2019 is in place with a budget of over €24 million aiming to raise the awareness and cultural promotion of alternative economy, provide financial and advisory help to new initiatives and strengthen the consolidation of existing ones (Ajuntament de Barcelona, 2017). Furthermore, the region’s strong tradition in cooperativism is an asset of organizational and relational capacity, which is very important for this type of experimentation. During the crisis, the Catalan cooperatives displayed stronger counter-cyclical behaviour when compared with conventional enterprises (Interview B.1). Since 2007, relatively fewer cooperatives closed down compared to the traditional enterprises and the loss of employment positions were far less; and by 2014 the cooperatives had already entirely recovered 2007 levels in job provision.<sup>5</sup>

In October 2011, Greece also introduced its first law on society and cooperative economy (Law 4019/2011).<sup>6</sup> The legislative act provided the first institutional framework for the development of SSE. Its main particularity and contribution is the introduction of a new legal entity for enterprises, the “Social Cooperative Enterprise” (SCE) defining the entrepreneurial capacity to address social causes through democratic participation for its members/workers (Nasioulas, 2012). Furthermore, the left-leaning SYRIZA coalition government that took office in 2015 introduced policy instruments and relevant documentation assisting the expansion of SSE. In 2016 the Hellenic Ministry of Labour, Social Insurance and Social Solidarity set up a “Special Secretariat for the Social and Solidarity Economy’”. A 6-year action plan (2017-2023) for the SSE in Greece drafted including new financial and policy instruments to strengthen and develop social and cooperative enterprises with a budget of €160 million mainly deriving from European funds (SSSSE, 2017). By mid-2017 more than one thousand SCEs were active in Greece with 45% of them operating in the greater Athens area employing on average five members/partners each (SSSSE, 2017).

The post-crisis local socio-economic context and the new legal, policy and financial tools provided a new operational framework for economic activities of SSE that favour small-scale businesses and Athens and Barcelona experienced a proliferation of alternative and social and cooperative economy experiments (Gritzis et al., 2015; Wigger, 2018). Especially in Barcelona, the new local council’s discursive, institutional and financial support fosters the

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<sup>5</sup> Data provided by the Catalan confederation of cooperatives ‘Confederació de Cooperatives de Catalunya’

<sup>6</sup> In 2016, the Law 4430/2016 (Government Gazette A205) replaced the previous one in an attempt to regulate the operation of the Social and Solidarity Economy businesses (SSSSE, 2017).

organic development of the emerging alternative economy actors. *“At the moment we have a lot of support, we were not used to this, is it difficult even to accept all this... We can say it is a little bit too much what is happening”* (Interview, B.1). *“It was night and day the before and after”* (Interview, B.6). The administration is aware of that but is trapped between the functional formality by which it has to operate as public administration body and the time constraints that policy implementation faces. SSE as an emerging bottom-up phenomenon has its rhythms and the SSE enterprises had a window of opportunity with this administration that need to take advantage of (Interview, B.3). *“The previous government saw the social business projects as a social protection scheme, while this one sees them as an economic project... Now the public contracts and calls include clauses that make the SSE enterprises able to participate in them”* (Interview, B.4). Furthermore, this institutionalization is complemented with education and training in economic diversity and the basic principles of SSE that gain space in both Athens and Barcelona. University courses, research seminars, training programs etc. flourish creating consciousness and knowledge through a scientific view of SSE and cooperativism.

#### *Urban SSE entrepreneurial discourses and practices*

*“There is a tradition on cooperatives and solidarity economy in sectors like agriculture but lately there have been cooperatives that started to get into many new sectors”* (Interview, B.5). Under the favourable institutional setting in Athens and Barcelona SSE initiatives started to spread in economic activities going beyond the typical role as social services providers. Smaller-scale and neighbourhood level projects gain access to organizational and financial support; Experiments on agro-food, café and restaurants, and educational services sectors flourished and a gradual expanding in more innovative economic domains started to take place like energy provision and IT services. The “urbanization” of social and cooperative entrepreneurialism takes place as these are modern and young enterprises, with highly skilled human, organizational and relational capital behind them and a mix of strong ideological/ethical motivation and entrepreneurial skills needed for them to succeed.

For initiatives in the tertiary sector, the small initial capital needed facilitates their establishment. The necessary cooperative capital covering the basic initial infrastructure investment derives usually from personal and family savings, or is provided at a minor cost by support structures like co-working spaces (Interview, A.3). As interviewees participating in a cooperative offering services of psychological health noted: *“The only thing that we basically needed was an office”* (Interview, A.4), or members of an information technology

SCE, *“Everyone brought his own laptop”* (Interview, A.5). In Athens, the culture of co-working spaces started gradually to expand with a few dozens of such initiatives operating today in the city while in Barcelona according to official estimates around 290 co-working spaces operate with rental prices between 60 and 300 euros per month for a fully equipped office (Interview, B.2).

The discourses used by the interviewed micro-entrepreneurs to describe themselves and their operations reveal the degree of spontaneity and/or deliberate rationale related to the decision of taking part in the social, solidarity, and cooperative economy. Most of their testimonies reveal a mix of both cultural (ideological and ethical) and structural reasons which seems to prevail. Unemployment and the precariousness of the labour market are considered by the new SSE entrepreneurs as main drivers for their final decision to experiment with those alternative forms of economic activity. As one of the interviewees stated, *“When people become unemployed they try to do something, to take their future into their hands”* (Interview, A.9). The economic crisis created a labour supply of people with common past trajectories, educational and working experience or even political ideas. *“We knew each other from the past, we used to study together and when we returned to Athens, we found ourselves unemployed or part-time employed and we decided that we could do something collectively”* (Interview, A.4). *“We believe that coops of this kind are a solution and is a solution also for this collective depression we see around us, cause it’s better to even fail collectively than follow a lonely personal business path”* (Interview, A.5).

So far, largely collaborative attitude and cooperation among the various projects on SSE prevailed. It is expressed through the creation of networks or groups of SSE enterprises. Those networking practices generate empowering dynamics through increased visibility and knowledge sharing *“if you start now and go to ask help from the network or even to us we can help you with the documentation”* (Interview, A.4). Moreover, they facilitate economic synergies, often through non-monetary transactions: *“We build their web page and they offer us lunch coupons”* (Interview, A.5). Others emphasised the importance of strengthening ties with social movements: *“We count the working hours and have a number of hours that we can devote on social movements empowering and help other projects”* (Interview, B.7).

Social enterprises and cooperatives operate also in the conventional market economy and thus are confronted with ordinary business problems especially in their initial phase related to the return of investment and market competition. *“Many often forget that a SCE is a business, not an NGO or an association”* (Interview, A.6). For some, even after two-three years of their establishment, it remains hard to become profitable and scale-up making their

business model economically sustainable (Interview, A.4; Interview, A.5; Interview, B.7). In the meantime, other initiatives display exceptional development rates, organizational and networking capabilities. As is the case of a 2<sup>nd</sup> degree coop in Barcelona (i.e. network of coops) providing consultancy, training and facility management services to its cooperative members *“we started with six members [in 2011] now we are 16, we have two co-working spaces and looking for a third one”* (Interview, B.6). Viability and profitability should not be associated though since the motives and goals of SSE are often different from conventional enterprises: *“We don’t believe that we need high salaries if we offer services that address social needs but neither end up in a model of self-exploitation”* (Interview, A.4). *“The SCE that keep going are the ones that work in a counter-cyclical mood. Nothing stops them they are driven by their social goals, behind them they are fanatic social entrepreneurs, they want to do good no matter what”* (Interview, A.3). *“There are people that are really focused, have projects that serve a real need and have seen some market gap to serve and there are others that have illusions and desires, they are less realistic and less prepared. There are a lot of people focusing on real need but for people that cannot pay so, they are depended solely on public administration for funding”* (Interview, B.6).

The increased support from European, state and local funds, and tax incentives also created space for speculative attempts undermining the social and ethical character of the SSE, *“failed micro-entrepreneurs wishing to restart their activities through a new tax code of a SCE, or ones that create social enterprises with no substance waiting to apply for government or EU funds”* (Interview, A.7). Those attempts are characterised by another interviewer sharing the concerns as *“ghosts, website-social enterprises”* since they usually have no physical activities and maintain only an anonymous website with minimum information regarding the enterprise (Interview A.1). Those represent either abandoned projects or speculators waiting for funding opportunities. *“Many people name their enterprise social without being social. They try to ‘sell’ their projects to grant competitions, so they adapt the project according to the rules of the grant so I say it’s like a grants’ prostitution”* (Interview, B.7).

#### *SSE typologies and transformative potential*

Based on the field experience, there are clear distinctions over the state of mind and political views behind social and solidarity entrepreneurial schemes. In Athens and Barcelona, I’ve identified three basic types of SSE based on that positioning: (1) One can be characterized as ideologically neutral, driven from an ordinary traditional problem-solving position and

referring to small-scale social goals. Those social enterprises do not pay much attention to the entrepreneurial part and sustainability of the business itself. They exhibit associationism or NGO-type solidarity culture and take advantage of the developments in the SSE sector to create income generation schemes through employment or services to marginalized groups.

Then the other two types though acquire most of the discursive and economic space. (2) A seemingly apolitical, with a technocratic view of SSE. It tries to solve social problems that usually do not affect its members personally by utilizing a start-up mentality, mobilizing grand narratives and goals: *“There are social entrepreneurs that want a big impact, economic and environmental and scale”* (Interview, A.3). Various private organizations (banks, foundations etc.) and public sector bodies usually refer to this type of social entrepreneurialism when talking about SSE. *“There is the promotion of the idea of a social entrepreneur viewed as a superman pushing to save the world, a messiah view of the social entrepreneur or the social enterprise as cool and big with thousands and thousands of people working and benefiting from it”* (Interview, B.6). (3) And another that has its roots in political activism; its members develop alternative economic thinking and sees cooperativism and SSE from its transformative potential. Alternative here means that they mobilize counter-hegemonic and even post-capitalistic discourses, trying to develop pro-environmental attitude and practices, giving great importance to labour rights, democratic participation and self-organization schemes. Those experiments envision alternative production and consumption regimes but find legal representation in the market either through the form of cooperatives or social enterprises.

The difference in ideological positioning is often highlighted in the relationship with the various public or private funding schemes. Some see SSE funds and subsidies as opportunities to develop their business model trying to attract them. As expressed by one of the interviewees: *“when I started I had no idea that this project can be a social enterprise. I’ve just seen that it fit on the fund I was applying for. Now I understand why we fit in the SSE community”* (Interview, B.7). While others see it as a necessary evil: *“in general we try to have a 70% of our work from the private sector so to prove the sustainability of our project”* (Interview, A.5). Of course, the confrontation with the competitive market reality and its forces often do not always allow that since can be *“challenging to combine ideology with practical aspects”* (Interview, B.5). The contradiction of fighting with market forces and competing for market share with other similar initiatives is a true challenge: *“the truly conscious cooperative movement is being confronted every day with this reality”* (Interview, A.4).

Structural dynamics make those initiatives to often assign a secondary role to the environmental part of their sustainability discourses and practices. *“There is a tendency for ecological practices but is hard to find SCE where it is in the epicentre of their activities”* (Interview, A.8). *“We need to address sustainability but survivability is the main goal of SCEs, sustainable practices are more of a luxury for now”* (Interview, A.6). Engaging the SSE from a political point of view does not suffice to overcome structural difficulties for further ecological sensitization. On the contrary, it seems that engaging with SSE can motivate, inspire and move towards SSE economy’s deeper ideological principles people with previous neutral or apolitical stance. As one of the interviewers and founder of a SCEs network mentioned: *“Most of the people enter in SSE as a way out of unemployment, but some of them become later motivated by ideology when they start to understand what they are really trying to do”* (Interview, A.6). *“Even if someone entered the SSE looking for opportunities, working in SCE that follows the democratic decision making and sharing management can offer politicization of the person, it provides food for thought”* (Interview, A.4).

Table 2: *Summary of the main characteristics of interviewed SSE micro-enterprises. Differentiated based on the primary cultural reason behind their establishment.*

<b>Primary cultural reason behind the establishment</b>	<b>Social problem driven</b>	<b>Start-up mentality</b>	<b>Ideology driven</b>
<b>Social profile of SSE entrepreneurs</b>	All age groups - Socially marginalized groups	Young university graduates	Young university graduates and long-term unemployed
<b>The role of the economic crisis in their establishment</b>	Intensification of social needs that cannot be covered by the state or the market	Lower employment opportunities - Satisfaction of entrepreneurial ambitions through social economy	Lower employment opportunities - Window of opportunity for practical application of ideological positions
<b>The importance of the urban environment</b>	Low relevance – It creates specific conditions where social problems arise	High relevance - Provides opportunities for networking, funding, market space and visibility	High relevance - The relational capital is very important, it is place-specific and locally bounded
<b>Funding attraction</b>	Public and private donations and subsidies – Operational activities	Self-funding - Public and private donations and subsidies – Operational activities	Self-funding - Public subsidies – Operational activities
<b>Networking and cooperation</b>	Cooperation with public agencies and private companies - Other local, national and international actors, NGO's etc.	Networking among them – Cooperation with municipal agencies and private companies, local, national and international	Networking and solid cooperation among them and other like-minded local and national actors and political groups - Cooperation with public agencies
<b>Ecological / Sustainable practises and consciousness</b>	Low level of consciousness - Low levels of practice	Mid-level of consciousness - Low levels of practice, unless the enterprise is specialized in ecological sustainability	High level of consciousness - Low levels of practise, unless the enterprise is specialized in ecological sustainability
<b>Importance of collective ownership / management</b>	Case specific, it can be both a an encouraging and discouraging factor	Low relevance, usually there is a dominant figure or small leading team managing	High relevance, democratic decision making and profit redistribution is crucial

Source: The author.

## 6. DISCUSSION – CITIES IN CRISIS, MICROENTREPRENERILISM AND POST GROWTH TRANSFORMATION, LIMITATIONS AND OPPORTUNITIES

This paper explored the thesis that cities in the advanced post-industrial societies experiencing prolonged capitalistic crises become breeding grounds for spontaneous or deliberate practices fitting a transformative post-growth discourse. The assumption was that the unfavourable economic environment creates structural pressure that alters discursive and material practises, and the inquiry, if and to what extent a more socio-ecological balanced economic behaviour emerges. Using Athens and Barcelona as urban laboratories and considering the micro-enterprises as carriers of one of the most vibrant socio-economic agency in the urban economic system, micro-entrepreneurial behaviour operating in the conventional and the social market studied. In Athens and Barcelona, a combination of structural (crisis) and institutional conditions (new political landscape, the institutionalization of SSE initiatives etc.) offered the necessary setting for this research.

When decoding the altered practises and discourses of micro-enterprises and associating them with pillars of the post-growth scientific discourse the first finding (which is common in conventional and SSE micro-entrepreneurship) is their contribution to the shortening of the production-consumption cycle of the urban economies and the deepening local entrepreneurial networks. Both conventional and social micro-entrepreneurs revealed increased preference and cooperation with local suppliers even if that often derives from very different cultural and material positions.

This, however, remains the only tangible example of how the conventional urban micro-enterprises seem to contribute towards the generation of post-growth transformative dynamics. The crisis reinforced the economistic reflexes rather than cultural and ideological reflections on socio-economic and socio-ecological “other ways” of doing business. The micro-entrepreneurial class felt powerless in front of the extensive economic pressure. Even when alternative ways of entrepreneurial behaviour were discursively expressed (e.g. small everyday solidarity gestures to local improvised social groups, willingness to support eco-friendly or ethical business practices), their materialization remained limited or non-existent. Those urban micro-enterprises have to compete in shrinking markets both among them and with larger and stronger entrepreneurial actors and the local community is facing economic struggles itself; even if willing it cannot assist in their survival. As an interviewee framed it very vividly: *“The crisis is so big that even if you want to show solidarity to small shops or*

*alternative initiatives you'll go shopping from the Lidl supermarket cause its cheaper"* (Interview, A.1).

When it comes to the SSE entrepreneurialism a more complex picture arise. The crisis' structural pressure generated institutional, discursive and material developments in the social and cooperative micro-entrepreneurial world. A SSE ecosystem created and/or strengthened. This type of entrepreneurial engagement can be perceived as a natural ally of a post-growth economic system since in principle social and cooperative enterprises are able to deliver products and services of similar quality as the conventional ones but are more socially and environmentally aware. In Athens, social entrepreneurialism and the culture of cooperativism is being reborn and new experiments popped-up in various sectors, mainly in service provision. In Barcelona, apart from an observable widespread application of SSE initiatives across its neighbourhoods and the strengthening of the long tradition of cooperativism; social cooperatives display their capabilities and started to enter in advanced production and service domains like energy provision or telecommunications going beyond the small-scale typical set of activities. Most of those initiatives started from scratch as an answer to unemployment and a will to provide either social services or conventional products through a more democratic and socially equal model of entrepreneurialism. They follow a strategy of work in parallel with the organized regular market, and civic society promoting hybrid projects and programs allowing exchanges between the two markets. This can strengthen their economic base and can prove that indeed alternatives can operate and provide sustainable solutions to socio-economic and socio-environmental questions.

Unemployment and precarity in the local labour markets drive the interest towards SSE micro-entrepreneurialism but in parallel, the political and institutional support was of great importance for these developments. This created frameworks of participation and promoted the democratic internal organization and ethical redistribution in business structures that goes beyond accumulation and growth-oriented logic. It provided an operational framework, legitimacy and resources that in some cases overcome the rates of absorption and the pace of organic development of this emerging phenomenon. This formalization and normalization process created also threats to the spontaneity and cultural advantage of the SSE. Speculative attempts to access funds and conventional entrepreneurial thinking often finds space within those ecosystems showing the limits of legislation to force ethics or impose real democratic internal organization in SSE enterprises and promote ecologically responsible behaviour. Ideology, ethics, ecological sensibilities are often pre-existing qualities that can make an economic agent to operate under certain values both in the

conventional and social market.

Thus, what is equally important for our understanding of post-growth emerging dynamics is the cultural qualities that economic actors can convey. Indeed SSE entrepreneurs mobilize discourses relative to political ideology, social solidarity ethics and sustainable stance on entrepreneurship etc. as well as the cognitive will of engagement with alternative economic practices beyond the typical market relations. The proliferation of economic actors with these qualities contributes to the cultural change towards a more social and environmentally sustainable urban economy.

Concluding, in the cities under study, the main contribution of urban micro-entrepreneurialism to an unwitting post-growth future seems to be in the socio-economic part of the equation manifesting an emerging social mode of territorial development. Signs of increasing ecological consciousness exist but are rather less visible given the crisis' structural stress pressing for prioritization of social over ecological goals. This pressure translated in spontaneity and diversification of micro-entrepreneurial activities results in denser networks of local economic cooperation in the conventional sectors and proliferation of SSE activities. Social justice, poverty and income inequalities reduction, empowerment of marginalized social groups, the democratization and shortening of production-consumption systems and an ethical repositioning of economic functions are the results of this activity. Thus, indeed the crisis due to the structural pressure triggered institutional, discursive and material practises of needs-driven micro-entrepreneurialism, some expressions of which fit the post-growth discourse. The degree to which a viable economic base can be formed that has the capacity to support the emergence of an urban post-growth transformative context is something that future research can indicate and goes beyond the scope of this paper.

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