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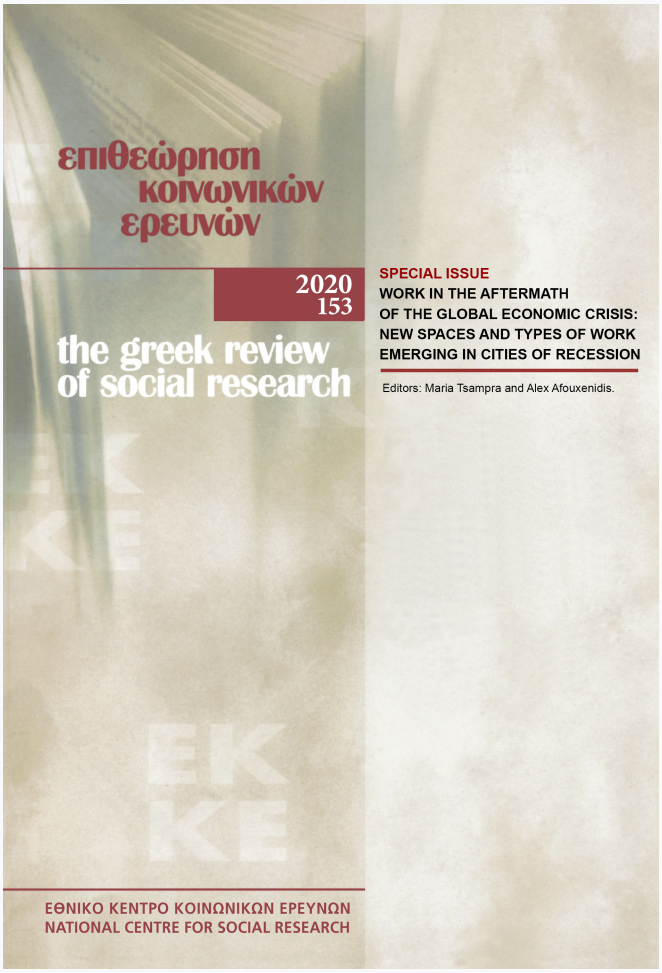

The emergence of desperate optimists: Managing the start-up working life in times of crisis

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The emergence of desperate optimists: Managing the start-up working life in times of crisis

ABSTRACT

The deepening of sovereign debt crisis has resulted into the increasing visibility of coworking spaces, hubs, and start-ups which have all proliferated in the Athenian downtown area. Due to poor job prospects, an on growing number of high-skilled young employees have been engaged into entrepreneurial activities. This paper offers vivid accounts of the ways young entrepreneurs manage their start-up working life by analyzing its qualities and the ways they shape their entrepreneurial self. As this qualitative study reveals, young entrepreneurs have a demanding working pattern that directly affects their work-life balance. However, despite its precarious and uneven nature, entrepreneurial career is experienced as a highly rewarding and creative choice. At the same time, young entrepreneurs repudiate necessity being as one of their fundamental entrepreneurial motives and they consistently brand themselves as passionate and aspiring individuals. By being based at a hub and pursuing entrepreneurial activities that hold the promise of getting paid doing what they love, I argue that we currently witness the emergence of "desperate optimists": a workforce which eagerly accepts its precarious conditions of work, cultivates a deep and profound connection with their occupation and for that reason undertakes the risk of acting entrepreneurially.

Keywords: *coworking, precarious labour, start-up entrepreneurship*

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Αντιγόνη Παπαγεωργίου

Η ανάδυση της γενιάς των «απελπιστικά αισιόδοξων»: Διαχείριση της εργασιακής ζωής στις νεοφυείς επιχειρήσεις στα χρόνια της κρίσης

ΠΕΡΙΛΗΨΗ

Το βάθεμα της ελληνικής κρίσης συνέβαλε στην αυξανόμενη προβολή συνεργατικών εργασιακών μονάδων όπως θερμοκοιτίδων και κόμβων επιχειρηματικότητας όπου φιλοξενούνται νεοφυείς επιχειρήσεις στο αθηναϊκό κέντρο. Λόγω περιορισμένων εργασιακών επιλογών νέοι υψηλών προσόντων δραστηριοποιούνται επιχειρηματικά. Το παρόν άρθρο εξερευνά τους τρόπους με τους οποίους οι νέοι αυτοί επιχειρηματίες διαχειρίζονται την επιχειρηματική τους εργασιακή ζωή, αναλύοντας τις διακριτές ποιότητες του εργασιακού τους βίου καθώς και τον τρόπο με τον οποίο δομούν τον επιχειρηματικό τους εαυτό. Η παρούσα ποιοτική έρευνα σκιαγραφεί έναν απαιτητικό εργασιακό βίο που στερείται ισορροπίας μεταξύ εργασίας και προσωπικής ζωής. Παρόλο, όμως, τον επισφαλή της χαρακτήρα, η επιχειρηματική καριέρα βιώνεται ως μια εξαιρετικά δημιουργική επιλογή που ανταμείβει τους νέους επιχειρηματίες τόσο σε επαγγελματικό όσο και σε προσωπικό επίπεδο. Ταυτόχρονα, το γεγονός ότι η επιχειρηματική τους δραστηριότητα υπαγορεύεται σε μεγάλο βαθμό από αναγκαιότητα αποσιωπάται, ενώ οι νέοι εργαζόμενοι παρουσιάζουν τους εαυτούς τους ως παθιασμένους και επίδοξους επιχειρηματίες. Το γεγονός ότι δραστηριοποιούνται εργασιακά και επιχειρηματικά από ένα συνεργατικό εργασιακό περιβάλλον συντηρεί και ενισχύει την ελπίδα, και βαθιά πεποίθησή τους ότι θα καταφέρουν να αμείβονται για αυτό που πραγματικά αγαπούν. Ως εκ τούτου, στην παρούσα συγκυρία, παρατηρούμε την ανάδυση μια νέας γενιάς εργαζόμενων, αυτής των «απελπιστικά αισιόδοξων». Μιας γενιάς που δέχεται με στωικότητα τις επισφαλείς συνθήκες εργασίας του, καλλιεργεί μια βαθιά και παθιασμένη σχέση με την εργασία και για αυτό δέχεται να αναλάβει το επιχειρηματικό ρίσκο με κάθε κόστος.

Λέξεις κλειδιά*: συνεργατικοί επαγγελματικοί χώροι, επισφαλής εργασία, νεοφυής επιχειρηματικότητα*

INTRODUCTION

This paper comes to examine the qualities of start-up working life in relation to the ways young entrepreneurs craft their self as a source of value within a competitive market realm (Weeks as cited in Farrugia, 2019). Taking into consideration that young professionals who navigate in fragmented labour markets tend to employ highly individualized practices such as self-promotion and self-branding techniques (Cremin, 2003; Hearn, 2010), the aim of this paper is to illustrate what it means for young start-uppers to manage a start-up working life in non-fixed workplaces. Drawing upon Rosalind Gill's study about new media work across EU, I use the word 'manage' that signifies "a critical inflection that comes from Marxist, feminist and poststructuralist thinking" (Gill, 2011, p. 249), to understand the way young start-uppers cope with the challenges and difficulties their working life entails. This study draws primarily upon semi-structured interviews with users and managers of hubs as well as founders of start-ups, in Athens, participant observation in one of the hubs under investigation, and shadowing of three key-informants that were employed for the study.

The paper is divided into four main sections. The first section offers a brief outline of the transformations of work, illustrating the casualization of employment. It traces the proliferation of creative labour while explains the reasons why I use these debates to frame my understanding of the deeper structural changes in employment that have profound effects on the way people conceptualize their self. It concludes by bringing forward the conflicting nature of creative labour as being fulfilling and precarious at the same time. It, then, turns its focus on establishing the "ambivalence of coworking" (de Peuter, Cohen S. and Saraco, 2017) as flexible workplaces tend to reproduce precarious working conditions and highly individualized ways of navigating within the labour market (Gandini, 2016a).

The second section illustrates the Greek case, analyzing the emergence of hubs as a response to the deepening of the crisis, while the third section presents the findings of my study, starting by introducing the qualities of start-up working life. First, it offers vivid accounts of the demanding working pattern of start-uppers which is constituted by long-hours cultures and the entire disregard of personal life. It, then, explores the way start-up work is presented as being more meaningful, fulfilling, and pleasurable than any other activity in life. In this context, this sort of work is reconceptualised as being "even better than sex" (Kelly, 2013; Trinca and Fox, 2004). Within the start-up ecosystem, work is redefined as a meaning making activity where this emerging model of employee can find themselves profoundly committed and in love to their entrepreneurial career.

What was striking during my fieldwork was the prevalence of a discourse of ‘‘love and commitment’’ about their professional path that tended to overshadow the material conditions of their working life. Indeed, as I realized, financial difficulties, pitfalls, and general concerns in regards to the viability of their entrepreneurial venture were not addressed openly. When I was attempting to discuss with them their motives behind the creation of their start-up entrepreneurial venture, young entrepreneurs were quite reluctant to admit that they were pushed into entrepreneurship due to poor job prospects. In times of crisis, as many studies suggest (Garcia-Lorenzo, Sell and Donnelly, 2014), becoming an entrepreneur serves primarily as a coping mechanism and a survival strategy. Without having any intention to undermine the ‘‘opportunity-driven’’ character of their entrepreneurial career, I support that in the Greek case, necessity and opportunity drivers are co-present in the rationales of early-stage entrepreneurs.

However, start-up entrepreneurs tended to overlook the dark sides of their entrepreneurial career. The reason to that is twofold. On the one hand, they consider start-up entrepreneurship as a highly rewarding and creative choice. In times of crisis where high unemployment rates prevail, having a career that is fulfilling is considered a luxury. On the other, they are aware that presenting themselves even partially as ‘‘necessity entrepreneurs’’ will, eventually, weaken their chances to get funded from any external resource. The moment start-up entrepreneurs would admit that necessity is among their motives, they would, eventually, find themselves being incompatible to the Schumpeterian perception of the entrepreneur - as someone who is motivated by a brilliant idea and wish to bring change and disruption (Kiessling, 2004). This has resulted to an internalization of the imperative to present themselves as passionate, self-motivated, and resourceful individuals. As I observed, they introduced themselves and were aspired to be known as risk-takers, brave, and fearless entrepreneurs. Necessity would deliberately harm the way they wanted to be portrayed. After all, as this section signifies no matter the qualifications, the cultivation of an exceptional personality that is completely independent from the material conditions becomes a tradable asset.

The fourth, and last, section concludes by analyzing the reasons why I consider the inherent optimism start-uppers expressed throughout my study as a sign of deep despair and hopelessness. In the Greek context where the deep-seated crisis was consistently framed as

opportunity for the creation of culturally and socially minded businesses[1], young employees had no other choice but presenting themselves as optimists. The ones who do not naturally comply are edged out from a highly fragmented and deregulated labour market. So, young entrepreneurs should demonstrate their gratefulness as well as their excitement and passion, despite the fact that they conduct a working life characterized by "a mixture of entrepreneurialism and precarity" (Michailidou and Kostala, 2016, p. 63).

By calling them "desperate optimists", I wish to state the internal conflict they have been through. They are desperate to sustain a meaningful working life and thus, start-up entrepreneurship is treated as the only mean for self-growth. So, "desperate optimists" as a metaphor, depicts the aforementioned discrepancy in highly affectional terms; the same way, young entrepreneurs talk about their work and negotiate their working life in a context of permanent crisis.

1. SETTING THE CONTEXT

1.1 The global restructuring of labour and the proliferation of creative work

It seems well established that precarious employment is a rapidly growing trend in the Western world (Bessant, Farthing and Watts, 2018). An on-growing number of people find themselves afflicted by poor job prospects in a highly deregulated labour market. As a result, the younger generations of employees face tremendous difficulties in moving up the social ladder. Over the last years, the term ‘‘precarity’’ (de Peuter, 2014) and its variations have been well adopted by researchers to describe the experience of risk and uncertainty associated with flexible and insecure patterns of employment (Standing, 2014).

Mass production which marked economy during Fordism broadly from 1945 to the mid-70s (Watson, 2019), offering employment security is no longer the case for the advanced economies of the West (Crowley, Tope, Joyce Chamberlain and Hodson, 2010; Esser and Hirsch, 1994). The promise of a well-protected job for life seems uneven as the transition happened after the mid-70s indicates a turn towards deregulation, decentralization, and deindustrialization (Harvey, 1989; Neilson and Rossiter, 2008). During the 1980s, precarisation of employment deepened as a lot of workers started to engage in work that does not produce physical objects but information, ideas, ‘state of beings’. And while industrial labour was in decline, ‘immaterial labour’ (R. Gill and Pratt, 2008; Lazzarato, 2007) emerged

[1] Indicative are event's like the one organized by the British Council in 2014 ("The Creative Economy—An infinite opportunity for growth," 2014). During the event the concept of creative economy was introduced and its sectors were presented as promising terrains for growth in Greece.

as a dominant form of work. As Sylvia Federici points out the precarity of labour is strongly rooted in the restructuring of production that resulted in various forms of ‘‘cultural’’, ‘‘creative’’, ‘‘cognitive’’ or ‘‘info’’ work. In addition to that, the popularity of creative labour would not be possible without the support of information and communication technologies (ICTs), the web, the cloud, and the digital technologies (Hesmondhalgh and Baker, 2011). Usually referred as ‘knowledge workers’ (Drucker, 1999), ‘‘venture labourers’’ (Neff, 2012), contemporary workers undertake work “[…] whether paid or unpaid, that is carried out using a combination of digital and telecommunications technologies and/ or produces content for digital media.” (Huws, 2012, p. 3).

The current mosaic of employment practices comes into the forms of temporary contracts, self-employment, project-based contracts and micro-entrepreneurship. Flexibility is experienced as being multi-dimensional, covering the entire working life of contemporary employees. Indeed, flexible employment contracts, skills, and organization models have become the rule in the current socio-economic relations. A growing number of workers are pushed to work outside of standard employment relationships, currently undertaking a ‘‘nomadic multiactivity’’ (Beck, 2000, p. 2) while composing their ‘‘own individual portfolio of work’’ (Grey, 1994). This contemporary ‘‘liquid modernity’’ (Bauman, 2000) is typified by the deepening of uncertainty as how to position and establish themselves in the labour market. As Beck points out in his book The Brave New World of Work:

> Paid employment is becoming precarious: the foundations of the social welfare state are collapsing; normal life-stories are breaking up into fragments. (Beck, 2000, p. 3).

Nevertheless, the structural changes in employment came also as a response to the ‘‘artistic critique’’ (Boltanski and Chiappelo, 2005) of industrial capitalism which perceived neoliberal interventions in the labour market as liberating, aiming to facilitate self-expression and self-realisation at work. Bureaucratic organizations were criticized for their rigidity and their lack of innovation that resulted in flattening their organizational hierarchies and focusing more on risk-taking and creative problem solving (du Gay, 1996; Fraser, 2001; Sennett, 1998). As Webb observes while Sennet deeply believes that new economic forms result into the corrosiveness of social bonds and personal meaning (Sennett, 1998), Giddens puts his hopes to the dynamism of a market-based society (Webb, 2004, p. 722). He sees in it an empowering opportunity for more people to engage in meaningful working lives (Giddens, 1991). With work being presented as a “serious play” (Kane, 2000), Nikolas Rose captures the way contemporary employees think of themselves:

> The worker is an individual in search of meaning, responsibility, a sense of personal achievement, a maximized ‘‘quality of life’’, and hence of work. Thus the individual is not to be emancipated from work, perceived as merely a task or a means to an end, but to be fulfilled in work, now constructed as an activity through which we produce, discover, and experience our selves. (Rose, 1989, p. 103).

So, employees pushed to become “entrepreneurs of their self” in a continuous race for self-improvement while “[…] work is reconfigured as an activity through which people produce and discover a sense of personal identity” (du Gay, 1996, p. 78). Selfhood becomes a project on its own that must be reflexively and actively pursued (Giddens, 1991) while self-development is elevated into human right (Illouz, 2007, p. 45). As studies suggest people tend to find themselves feeling less valued in corporate environments (Webb, 2004), and in turn, they seek for jobs that contribute to their professional and personal growth.

Younger generations of employees are being encouraged to be flexible and occupationally agile (Qin and Nembhard, 2015) while they are pushed to believe that “[…] job choices they make give messages about who they are and how successful they are in a market of personal distinction.” (Webb, 2004, p.725). So, the pressure experienced by contemporary employees is twofold: one the hand, they look for a job in a highly fragmented and deregulated labour, while on the other, they envisage a stronger sense of personal accountability over their working lives as they want them to be – and to be seen as – meaningful and fulfilling. Thus, to achieve this, people construct their very own biographies in a highly-deregulated market economy where selfhood is being eagerly carved according to market imperatives.

Critical scholarship suggests that freelancers and micro-entrepreneurs treat relationships as highly functional, career-oriented ‘‘network socialities’’ (Wittel, 2001) while the self is perceived as an eternal project of entrepreneurial development (Bröckling, 2015). Facilitated by the proliferation of digital technologies, the working lives of contemporary workers have no boundaries (Webster and Randle, 2016) in the sense that it is required from them to demonstrate ‘‘commitment’’ (Gregg, 2009). This results into finding contemporary workers on a constant need to prove their value, being ‘‘on a continuous pitch’’ (Gill, 2010). On top of that, formal education, skills or capacities are no longer the most important assets that could make a professional to thrive but rather their adaptability to the ‘‘enterprise culture’’ (McRobbie, 2015). So, with no clear and formal path in front of them, young workers are forming their identity in a highly relational and affective way. The work of

David Farrugia comes to shed light into the key social imperatives valorized by the market economy:

> In the cultivation of the young labouring subject, the affective experiences, relational styles and personal 'authenticity' of the self becomes the basis for labour market engagement and for working. The practices through which this takes place, and the modes of selfhood that these practices are designed to realise, constitute new aspects of classed subjectivity both within the labour force and outside work, in which the life of the subject is rendered productive or unproductive through labour market engagement. (Farrugia, 2019, p. 60).

Since creative labour has been presented widely as a meaningful and fulfilling career choice (Leadbeater and Oakley, 1999), critical scholarship came to scrutinize its very qualities. Looking into the employment and working conditions of people who are engaged into a wide range of creative activities and occupations, critical scholarship has questioned the over-polished accounts of creative labour which is often presented as 'cool, creative, and egalitarian' (Banks, Gill and Taylor, 2013; R. Gill, 2002; Hesmondhalgh and Baker, 2011). From the aforementioned studies, a clearly consistent picture emerges, pinpointing the hidden costs of freelance, flexible, and entrepreneurial nature of work such as anti-social and long working hours, poor job prospects as well as inequality in pay. These qualities of creative labour have led scholarship to support that we currently witness the ''feminization of work'' where precariousness, mobility, and fragmentation are the rule when it comes to employment conditions (Morini, 2007). However, despite its dark sides, creative labour is highly experienced as desirable, autonomous, and profoundly fulfilling (Hesmondhalgh, 2017; Hesmondhalgh and Baker, 2011; Hesmondhalgh and Zoellner, 2013).

At the same time, fixed working arrangements are becoming less and less the physical cornerstones of professional life. More flexible structures and ways of working proliferate, aiming to tackle the challenges of the younger generations of employees who consider themselves more as emancipated entrepreneurs than precarious employees. Indeed, these professionals are no longer treated as workers who are compelled to participate in capitalist production but are perceived more like entrepreneurs or ''entreployees'' (Pongratz and Voß, 2003) who aspire to take their fate into their hands. This, in fact, has profound effects not only on the way people work but also on the way people see and understand the world around them and position themselves within it.

1.2 Establishing the ambivalence of coworking

As independent workers now represent “the fastest growing group in the EU labour market” (Leighton, 2015, p. 1), traditional perceptions about how employment, work, and workplace should look like are being challenged by the wider restructuring of labour and the rise of unemployment (Katz and Krueger, 2017). The fixed corporate environment that has long symbolized security and financial prosperity in people’s mind can no longer guarantee social mobility (Fraser, 2001). Bringing a culture of flexibility and informality, coworking introduces nontraditional practices in workplaces such as freedom to work remotely in flexible layouts where vertical hierarchies and bureaucratic culture are being somewhat disrupted.

Tracing coworking origins, it might be seen as developing from the demand for “third spaces” (Oldenburg, 1989) first recorded in the 90s in the USA. “Third spaces” nowadays come to respond to the contemporary working life of mobile young professionals; being always on the move while conducting mostly casualised forms of work. Hence, the diffusion of coworking is closely related to the proliferation of a casualised, project-based, and freelance workforce (Cappelli and Keller, 2013). While celebratory accounts of coworking relate the phenomenon within the concept of ‘‘sharing economy’’ (Botsman and Rogers, 2011), de Peuter observes that co-working responds to two manifestations of precarity: 1) the isolation of working alone at home and 2) the lack of access to affordable commercial property. Assuming that coworking has some analogies with start-up incubation, researchers set their hopes on the phenomenon in terms of improving the financial and entrepreneurial situation of its users (Capdevila, 2013; Merkel, 2015; Nagy and Johnson, 2016; Viasasha, 2017).

At first, a body of literature examined coworking in terms of collaborative production and bottom-up self-management (Lange, 2011; Merkel, 2015). However, in today’s highly diversified coworking landscape, scholarship has started to critically explore its ambivalence (de Peuter et al., 2017; Gandini, 2015, 2016b). As de Peuter et al. observes:

> Coworking is deeply ambivalent. It emerged from below and was subsequently harnessed by private market interests. Coworking softens effects of flexploitation, albeit in a manner that tends to deepen neoliberal subjectification. (de Peuter et al., 2017, p. 701).

Besides the fact that coworking spaces “can be enclaves of shadow economy and precarious working conditions” (Avdikos and Kalogeresis, 2016, p. 1), these spaces are also destined to be regarded as ever-changing since their users may utilize them as “a transition point in their professional lives” (Schmidt and Brinks, 2017, p. 292). In an attempt to

understand the way biographical pathways are being constructed (Furlong and Cartmel, 2007), scholarship sees young people to transit from one employment condition to another (Woodman and Wyn, 2015). Within these blurry and continuous transitions, studies have identified the centrality of networking and self-branding techniques employed by professionals aiming to secure a position within labour market while being based at coworking spaces (Gandini, 2016a).

2. ILLUSTRATING THE GREEK CASE

2.1 The emergence of hubs as a response to the deepening of crisis

In the context of Greek economic downturn, there has been an expansion of flexible employment forms as a result of the wider competitive restructuring of the economy and the extensive austerity measures applied (Gialis and Tsampra, 2015). According to Eurostat, in August 2019 unemployment rate in Greece was 17%, the highest in EU where EU-28 unemployment is at 6.2% ("Unemployment statistics," 2019). According to Gialis and Tsampra, there has been a series of factors that contribute towards this direction: the high unemployment rate, the semi-fordist structures, as well as the emergence of independent contractors who have come to cover the need for high-qualified low-paid employees in the ''new economy'' sectors (Gialis and Tsampra, n.d., p. 5).

Highly skilled and educated young people have found themselves suffering from very long unemployment or being offered low paid jobs that have no connections to their studies. In this context, as Giotopoulos et al. points out, as job alternatives become fewer or worse, highly skilled individuals tend to be involved in entrepreneurship (Giotopoulos, Kontolaimou and Tsakanikas, 2017). As the official report for the Cultural and Creative Industries (CCIs)[2] published by the Ministry of Culture and Sports states:

> More than 71% of the creative enterprises in Greece is either a sole proprietorship or an enterprise with one employee, 25.4% employ two to nine persons, while enterprises with 50 employees and more represent barely 0.6%. (Hellenic Ministry of Culture and Sports - Executive Unit-Partnership Agreement for the Development Framework 2014 - 2020, 2016, p. 19).

So, what can be argued here - and this is something to be further tested empirically- is that the formation of new business ventures constitutes a necessity-driven choice (Garcia-

[2] According to the aforementioned report, "the term 'cultural and creative industries' or 'culture and creativity industries' (CCIs) usually encompasses any enterprise producing marketable goods of high aesthetic or symbolic nature, the use of which aims at stimulating consumers' reactions stemming from the experience" (Hellenic Ministry of Culture and Sports - Executive Unit-Partnership Agreement for the Development Framework 2014 - 2020, 2016, p. 3).

Lorenzo et al., 2014) for highly-skilled individuals that does not contribute automatically towards further job growth but it entails greater chances for them to undertake decent work[3]. Indeed, in the midst of crisis, CCIs have emerged as a promising employment terrain for youth. However, this turn towards creative entrepreneurship happened without any strategic institutional support while policy interventions "were both belated and awkward" (Michailidou and Kostala, 2016, p. 62).

According to Endeavor Greece, an international non-profit organization that monitors entrepreneurship, the number of Greek start-ups that are founded each year has risen 9 times since 2010 and by then, it has been multiplied almost every year (Endeavour Greece, 2015). The deepening of sovereign debt crisis has resulted into the increasing visibility of coworking spaces, hubs, and start-ups which proliferate in the Athenian context. That said, as Avdikos and Kalogeresis observe:

> Collaborative workplaces emerged after the gradual collapse of the stable employment paradigm that was one of the main features of the Keynesian welfare state and as a response to precarious working conditions that were augmented during the recent economic crisis and the subsequent recession. (Avdikos and Kalogeresis, 2017, p. 1).

More precisely, investigating the emerging creative sector, Avdikos notes that the majority of creative workers are mostly young (maximum 40 years old), working in a blurred professional status without any legal/social security, using primarily capital mostly from the family's savings to start a creative business (Avdikos, 2014, p. 112). More precisely, evidence from Greek design reveals extremely precarious working conditions as designers do not get paid for working overtime, and 60% have a side job in the shadow economy[4] (Avdikos, Kalogeresis, Demetriadis and Penlides, 2015). In addition to that, the aforementioned large study reveals that young designers who reported working from a "third space" (hub, coworking, etc) expressed high levels of job satisfaction which had no direct positive correlation with their income (Avdikos and Kalogeresis, 2016). This finding prompted me to examine what it means to manage a working life while being based at a ''third space'', focusing on its qualities as well as the ways start-uppers negotiate and actively construct their selves.

[3] Decent work is a policy concept developed by the International Labour Organization (ILO). Decent work stands for fair remuneration, workplace security, and better prospects for personal development and social integration (Heery and Noon, 2017).

[4] The "shadow economy" in this context is defined as unreported economic activities that are referring to legal transactions (Schneider and Enste, 2013).

2.2 The Athens hubs' scene

In 2016, when the fieldwork of this study took place, Athens counted more than fifteen hubs initiated primarily by independent founders, collectives, and corporations. However, the diversity of the existing terms under which all these 'third spaces' operate tend to obscure coworking debate in terms of their overall aim and role within the wider Athenian creative economy. What I support, is that coworking as a term can only capture one aspect of the phenomenon. Indeed, users of these spaces cowork but as studies underline (Brown, 2017; Capdevila, 2013; Dovey et al., 2016; Spinuzzi, 2012), they expect more than just an office, a strong Wi-Fi connection, and an easy going atmosphere.

In search of an umbrella term that can illustrate the diversity of such spaces that address diverse professionals, entrepreneurs, and small company owners, I subsume this variety of flexible shared structures under the term ''hub''. I define hubs as permanent or temporary junctions where various professionals work, meet, and interact. In addition to that, such spaces tend to offer a set of services including workspace, training, mentoring and business-to-business networking. Hubs can also vary in terms of statuses of ownership, services, and models of operation.

Taking into the consideration the diversification of hubs as well as the fragmentation of creative occupations and the lack of data (Michailidou and Kostala, 2016), I conducted semi-structured, in-depth interviewees with owners, managers, and selected participants of corporate and independent hubs[5]. Public hubs started to operate relatively later in 2014, when an array of start-up services had already been covered, established, and successfully provided by the two other categories identified few years ago. That said, state's belated intervention into the terrain of start-up entrepreneurship was condemned by the existing start-up ecosystem to remain strictly marginal and delimited in terms of attracting potential applicants and playing a significant role within the Greek start-up ecosystem.

In Athens, a total of 18 personal interviews were conducted in 2016, offering vivid accounts of interviewees' educational and professional paths, experiences, practices, and career expectations. 11 interviews took place with start-up entrepreneurs and collectives while 7 with managers and founders of hubs. Five of them had their own business venture, acting as solo entrepreneurs while the other six had joined hubs as members of a start-up collective. Recruited through snowball sampling, interviewees were coming from diverse

5 The current study has identified three categories of hubs according their status of ownership: 1) the private hubs that are initiated primarily by sole entrepreneurs or collectives, 2) the corporate hubs that are affiliated to private institutions 3) the public hubs that are attached to various public funding bodies.

backgrounds but they were all highly qualified. With most of the participants having acquired a MA degree and even an MBA, they named themselves digital professionals, content strategists, project managers, software developers, designers, architects, marketers, business managers. In terms of employment condition, participants fell into many different categories. Along with them being entrepreneurs, they were also working as freelancers to other start-ups while one of them was employed to a big corporation.

The majority of start-uppers fell into the 25-34 age group as they were all at the beginning of their career, having limited working experience apart from one interviewee. In addition to that, besides being entrepreneurs, many of them have side jobs to pay the bills and expand their professional network. It became very clear from the beginning of this study that start-uppers do not follow a linear professional path, well defined, and stable – this was, indeed, not available in their case. Instead, start-uppers construct their own Do It Yourself (DIY) career biographies (Adkins, 2013) that are adaptable, ready for adjustments, modifications, and open to contingencies.

Our methodological approach emphasized the subjective experiences of interviewees and along with the semi-structured interviews it was enriched with participatory observation. Aiming to truly deep dive into the everyday working life of start-up entrepreneurs, I was based in one of the hubs under investigation for a three-month period where I also deployed shadowing technique. Shadowing is a qualitative research technique, applied to organizational studies (McDonald, 2005) where the researcher follows a member of an organization for an extended period of time. In my case, I shadowed the three key-interviewees. Besides the fact that I was working sitting next to them, I was attending start-up events and other start-up related activities. I, often, asked for clarifications that triggered further debates in relation to their working life and the wider start-up ecosystem.

Drawing upon the observation that young professionals who navigate in fragmented creative labour markets tend to employ highly individualized practices such as self-promotion and self-branding techniques (Cremin, 2003; Hearn, 2010), this paper aims to provide vivid accounts of how start-up entrepreneurs manage their working life, its qualities, as well as the ways their self is being shaped, constrained, and negotiated in the current conditions of the deep-seated crisis in Athens.

3. MANAGING THE START-UP WORKLIFE

3.1 A demanding working pattern

As studies have shown, work conducted in informal, creative, workplaces tend to be highly self-managed and exploitative in its nature as individuals tend to consider themselves as being their own bosses. In this context, self-exploitation is often even described as desirable (Gill, 2007, 2010; Hesmondhalgh and Baker, 2011) while "[…] workers become so enamored with their jobs that they push themselves to the limits of their physical and emotional endurance" (Hesmondhalgh and Baker, 2010, p.6). This was well reflected to the way Gregory, a young start-upper, managed his working life:

> During the morning, I work in another start-up […] and I am based at [Hub1] for about four hours per day. It is something I do part-time. Then, I leave heading to the [name of University]. Attached to the Uni, there is the [Hub2], people there, are very friendly and helpful. From [Hub2], we work on my start-up idea. I do some freelancing from there or when I am at home. […] From here [Hub3], we work on developing the app, the business things are getting done at [Hub2]. I wake up around 8 in the morning and a good day finishes at 11.30. And this is happening during the weekdays as well as during weekends. Maybe some Sundays I am not allowing to myself to do anything, but that's not really happening (Gregory, start-upper).

Gregory experienced a highly fragmented working life in terms of employment conditions and practices. As I discovered early on during my fieldwork, his case was not the exception but rather, the rule. More precisely, start-uppers were greedy in terms of how many hours they devoted working towards the marketability of their start-up idea, the numbers of hubs they were based at, as well as the projects they got involved. Being in a constant move between hubs, start-up related events, and lectures, Dimitris admitted that he found himself constantly working:

> Look, let me tell you something straight. I feel that I am constantly working. I work minimum 12 hours per day and when I sleep, I see all these start-up ideas in my dreams. (Dimitris, start-upper).

Antonis, a young start-up founder, described himself as being suffered by the "founderitis syndrome" where as he says he "cannot really tell what is work and what is hobby, the boundaries are blurry." (Antonis, start-upper). Likewise, Eva was engaged into an endless working mood, rarely allowing herself to take a break. As she points out the opening hours of the hub are flexible, so is her daily work time:

> Look, the space is open between 10.00-21.00 but at the beginning we were here from 09.00 in the morning till 02.00 after midnight, of course this was applicable for Saturdays and Sundays […]. (Eva, founder of an independent hub).

Marios, founder of another independent hub, admitted that his personal life has been paused for the last two years:

> I work 12 hours, actually up to 14 hours per day, from 09.00 in the morning till 22.00, actually till the midnight. What do I do for my personal life? [laughs] Sometimes I'm leaving to go on vacations, or to visit another hub somewhere around the world. It's been 2 years since we started the hub and I can say that now we have achieved a better balance. Now, […] I am allowed to leave at 22.00 if I want to. (Marios, founder of independent hub).

What is striking is that vacations are only allowed when are somewhat business-related. Time-off is not solely leisure time but an opportunity for professional expansion and self-development.

Operating in the grey area between self-employment and paid employment, all young entrepreneurs agreed that there is no specific time schedule. Indeed, start-uppers have already stopped counting their working hours, feeling an internal commitment to work 24/7 basis. That said, it can be observed that the pattern of the market becomes the pattern of work (Shih, 2004). Start-uppers' stance, to be always alerted and on the move, is well described by Boltanski and Chiapelo, as being one of the inherent characteristics of working life in post-Fordist era, where individuals should:

> […] be always pursuing some sort of activity, never to be without a project, without ideas, to be always looking forward to, and preparing for, something […] (Boltanski and Chiappelo, 2005, p. 9-10).

The long, non-standard working hours formulate a demanding working pattern that blurs the boundaries between work and life as well as establishes and deepens the emotional attachment of start-uppers to their work.

3.2 Work better than sex

Many interviewees described their transition into a 'start-up way of life' being full of personal and emotional sacrifices. Many of them were pushed to end long-term relationships, distanced themselves from their old habits, and got introduced to new ones that they considered, though, more 'meaningful' ones. As Gregory explained:

> […] due to the nature of start-up work, I had to end a long-term relationship. We were together for like 5 years, but she couldn't get this shift towards the start-up mentality. […] But by the time I brought my child into the relationship, and I am referring to my start-up as being my child, because I am so connected to it, this immediately

> intervened to my relationship. It changed the balance, it caused me problems. So, I had to end it. […] for me, it is better to admit that this is a problem that cannot be solved. So, I have decided to pause my personal life for the next 6 months at least […] (Gregory, start-upper).

Likewise, Maria entered the start-up entrepreneurial terrain after she ended a long-term relationship which was "holding her down". She cherished her entrepreneurial career insofar as it was liberating her: "I am like a soldier, I wake up early in the morning, I have changed my habits […]" (Maria, start-upper). This deep sense of purpose, mission, and satisfaction that start-uppers draw from entrepreneurship comes to counterbalance any personal sacrifices they have already made, and would make in the future. The satisfaction derived from their choice was conceptualized as being superior to any other pleasure personal relationships could offer to them. This was also reflected to the narrative of Antonis:

> […] the truth is that I feel blessed that I've been engaged to a professional activity that I really and deeply like […] (Antonis, start-upper).

In their book, Trinca and Fox contribute to the discussion around the role of work in the lives of contemporary employees. Using the provocative title "Better than Sex: How a Whole Generation Got Hooked on Work", they illuminate the high levels of commitment young generations of employees show to their work when it promises to act as a vehicle of self-actualization (Trinca and Fox, 2004). As Kelly points out:

> […] when work is better than sex, the self is conducting itself as an enterprise in ways that open up possibilities for finding purpose and meaning, for making choices; and, when the self is only able to find work that is toil and drudgery, then the self is a failing, even failed, enterprise that is unable to exercise choice or conduct a life in ways that would offer meaning and purpose. (Kelly, 2013, p. 106).

Indeed, when Alexandra found herself in a position where she was working in a job that did not fulfill her at all, she mentioned to me that she wanted to "jump out of the balcony". For her, a normal job would distant her from her real self:

> […] It is because my character is a little bit of weird…I think if the times were different and I had a normal job, I would have been so sad and miserable. It is because I want to create, I want to do a creative job. (Alexandra, start-upper).

For start-uppers, conducting a corporate, ''normal'' job that leaves little or no room at all for self-realization was presented as a ''no-go'' choice.

3.3 The repudiation of necessity

As discussed in the introductory chapter of this study, the growth of self-employment is highly interrelated to the structural transformation that Greek society has been undergoing over the last few years. Within a context of crisis and of growing decline of middle class jobs, entrepreneurship is reconceptualized as the only viable career choice for young educated people in Greece. However, in this very concrete discourse of love and commitment, entrepreneurship as a necessity-driven choice was deliberately taken out of the picture. This was deep echoed to the narrative of Vassilis, founder of a B2B software start-up:

> […] if someone is only in it because he couldn't find a job, it is better for me to not even start a start-up […] if you can't maneuver your way into the labour market […] – and that has nothing to do with the unemployment rates […] (Vassilis, start-upper).

For Marios, start-up entrepreneurship might be necessity-driven to an extent, but this shouldn't override the passion and the love for the entrepreneurial path:

> […] it shouldn't be in any case entrepreneurship driven by necessity […] deep inside there might exist that you have no choice, but you should start by asking yourself what is it that I love doing […] (Marios, founder of independent hub).

After a long talk I had with Gregory, he explains to me that all these hubs and start-up initiatives were the tangible effects of a long-standing crisis which has resulted in high unemployment:

> All these spaces that are mushrooming in Athens, it's because of people's need to do something else. […] they've realized that there are no job opportunities both in the private and public sector. There are no jobs. Let me put it that way, if you don't want to stay at home depressed, you start your own business. (Gregory, start-upper).

In our informal communication, necessity entrepreneurs, the people who admitted that they were in the hubs because they didn't have another option, were treated by the other participants as low qualified entrants who were not motivated by a brilliant and promising idea. These necessity entrepreneurs were often served as the bad examples, justifying failures and pitfalls.

3.4 Be passionate

Throughout their residency at the hubs, young entrepreneurs were trained to learn how to sell their idea and thus, their self – workshops, sessions, and meetings were addressing the issue thoroughly. Dimitris and his team had won many contests as he explained to me "[…] from the pitch you can do in front of people, you can show yourself." Indeed, the fact that start-

uppers do not have a ready to show product reinforces the argument that it is the self that should be demonstrated rather than the start-up idea itself.

Moreover, as Gregory pointed out, in these events, start-uppers "have fun with the investors for 5-10 minutes". Indeed, start-uppers are required to pitch their idea in a limited amount of time. This increases the intensity and the pressure to grow as start-uppers want desperately to stand out of the crowd.

Aiming to figure out what the investors are looking for, Christos, an Angel Investor[6] I informally met, explained that they would like to meet "[…] passionate entrepreneurs who want to do big things". Surprisingly enough, a passionate self overshadows any other skill or qualification. Taking into consideration that start-uppers were uniformly from middle-class backgrounds, highly educated, with some of them, currently pursuing an MBA or even a second Post-Graduate Degree, their educational qualifications were considered somehow necessary but at the same time insignificant. So, "being passionate" implies that start-uppers should "become passionate". It requires, then, "emotion work" from young workers' side "to manage" an emotion or to do "deep acting" (Hochschild, 1979, p. 561). In the current socio-economic context, Farrugia's study demonstrates that:

> The mobilization of resilient, aspirational and 'passionate' subjectivities is now promoted as a requirement for labour market engagement amongst unemployed young people, whose intrinsic 'passion' is positioned as critical to their success […]. A discourse of 'soft skills' encourages the development of relational competencies and emotional expressiveness as critical attributes for all contemporary workers […] (Farrugia, 2019, p. 50).

However, when individuals fail in winning competitions and gathering investors' interest, they feel a deep sense of shame. And while self-blaming is a phenomenon well-discussed in creative labour studies (Banks, 2007; Gill, 2007; McRobbie, 2015), in the abovementioned cases, an individual attributes his failure to the absence of certain qualities from his/her personality. This perception was mirrored to the narrative of Vassilis whose start-up collective failed in a competition:

> It was our fault, we couldn't communicate it very good. It's a matter of confidence, you should be extremely extrovert and I have stage fright by default. (Vassilis, start-upper).

6 An Angel Investor is an affluent individual who act as an investor to start-ups. They usually provides capital in exchange for ownership equity. They are called "angels" since they mostly risk by giving funding to early-stage start-ups that most investors would not do.

Vassilis' put the blame on his lack of confidence, the "stage fright he has by default". Indeed, the fact that the funding available was limited and hard to be acquired was never mentioned. In turn, it was all about the ways self is being demonstrated. Likewise, Manolis explained to me the reason why they have failed so far to find funding for their newly founded business:

> Look, we do not communicate it the right way […] I think it is also the self-confidence that matters […], you should be extrovert. […] we are pushed a lot by our mentor to go out and talk about our idea. (Manolis, start-upper).

While extroversion is perceived as a prerequisite in order to be introduced to the entrepreneurial world, ''self-confidence'' is elevated to a top characteristic of the entrepreneurial personality.

4. CONCLUDING REMARKS

4.1 The emergence of desperate optimists

This paper illustrated sharply the very conditions of start-up working life in times of crisis. Despite their uneven future perspectives, the precarious conditions under which they work, the long working hours culture they have adopted, start-uppers insisted that they were highly satisfied from their working life – and that, they shared an unbounded optimism for the future. In fact, in a condition of deep-seated crisis, young professionals kept their expected working conditions very low in respect of the money they were earning as well as their working and living conditions. That said, it must be noted that very few of them have access to insurance, benefits, and pension schemes. However, the right to decent work that is fulfilling and meaningful has been conceptualized as a contemporary luxury.

As this current study demonstrates - and other empirical studies (Michailidou and Kostala, 2016) have pointed out- start-up entrepreneurs cultivate deep, intimate, and affective relationship with their occupation and to some extent, with their start-up ventures. This affection comes to outweigh any personal sacrifice. In addition to that, in the current post-fordist regimes, work and life are not two different spheres. They rather overlap as both are considered meaning-making mechanisms for the individual's life as a whole.

In this context, promoting yourself and cultivating your personal brand is experienced as inevitable, as something genuinely pleasant and desirable. That way, young entrepreneurs do not merely seek for immediate financial rewards but they tend to engage in various value-creating activities - after all, joining a hub is one of them. They do that, as it gives them

professional visibility while keeping the hope for becoming emancipated through decent work in the near future, alive.

As this paper showed, being an entrepreneur has not been for young employees a strict nine to five commitment but in fact, it has been a long and uneven process. Becoming an entrepreneur serves as the ultimate life goal which may bring autonomy, independency, social recognition, and, of course, prosperity. The entrepreneurial self is something yet to be achieved – or better to be revealed. It is a lifelong project of endless self-development and self-realization. And, in the Athenian context, becoming a start-up entrepreneur serves primarily, as a boost to the individual's self-esteem.

Instead of being a job-hunter, an unemployed, someone who has been recently fired, young employees brand themselves as start-up entrepreneurs – the same way they brand themselves as optimists, resilient, extrovert, and aspiring individuals. The desperate optimism start-uppers expressed can be, indeed, justified. The chances of self-realization go hand in hand with the risk of failing and having to start again. That said, the way young start-uppers demonstrated their optimism signifies foremost a profound status anxiety, as the uneven future evokes fears. Facing a continuous uncertainty and deep structural constraints, young start-uppers activate all the resources available to secure and protect themselves from being pushed to working in a job that does not match to their high qualifications or even find themselves unemployed. Above all, the proliferation of start-up entrepreneurialism, as a promising and fulfilling professional path, signals a shift towards the emergence of a workforce which eagerly accepts its precarious conditions of work, is mostly based at non-unionized workplaces such as hubs, undertaking the risk of acting entrepreneurially.

While my PhD study was still in progress, many participants of this research and people I met throughout my fieldwork decided to leave Greece. In fact, in their constant search for funding, they found themselves drained and hopeless. Others dropped out, as they managed to secure employment in international corporations or other start-up firms that managed to scale faster than others in Greece. Very few are still active in the Greek start-up scene.

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