

***Being an Ex-worker:
The Experience of Job Loss in a Tobacco Factory in Piraeus***

Manos Spyridakis
(University of Peloponnese)

maspy@uop.gr

In this ethnographic study I discuss the ways by which dismissed tobacco workers from the city of Piraeus experience their job loss in a context of labour market deregulation and dwindling social protection. I demonstrate how they struggle to preserve their working identity and to make ends meet while being gradually downgraded, in material and social terms. Coming from a significant employment background, these workers still rely on their strong work ethic forged by their employment history and their participation in the local social networks. Trapped between their own inability to move on with their lives and the influence of remote market forces, they are forced to settle for unrewarding, low paid, non-standard forms of employment, thus becoming a vulnerable reserve labour army exploited under flexible work arrangements. Finally, I show that anthropologically informed ethnography can be of great value for understanding the realities of current post-industrial labour relations from the perspective of those 'below'.

Keywords :job loss, working identity, labour market, social networks, social mobility, welfare state.

Introduction

In this article, I focus on how former tobacco workers experience the process and the significance of job deprivation. These workers were employed in a thriving tobacco industry called Keranis, which operated in the centre of Piraeus for about ninety years, employing many workers from the local labour market and representing for them the attainment of secure employment. Over the last decade, the company, due to mismanagement, experienced a financial downturn that resulted in bankruptcy in 2007. Today, the remaining 145 workers are still unpaid.¹

Anthropological research has addressed the complex relationship between unemployment, precariousness and making a living. Ethnographic evidence has indicated that, in order to understand how people experience situations and processes which render them redundant, one should look beyond impersonal statistical data (Procoli 2004: 3) and delve into their daily lives as they find alternative employment, either formal or informal. Depending on the economic and political context, anthropological research has focused on a variety of factors crucial for people's social reproduction. To mention but a few, Pappas' ethnography (1989) of the Seiberling plant in Ohio, U.S.A., underlined the job-seeking process from the view of the former rubber workers who became redundant after the plant's

¹ Research findings are based on in-depth open ethnographic interviews with 22 informants of various specialties carried out using the snowball technique. The average age ranged between 40 and 55 years old. The research was conducted in the first half of 2011.

shut-down. The study also addressed the management of their economic needs in the face of their declining income and their lack of trust in government employment services and retraining programmes. Nash's study (1989) of the General Electric plant in Pittsfield, U.S.A. analysed the significance and the structural repercussions of the factory on the lives of workers as they provided employment opportunities and steered the labour market toward corporate hegemony. Pardo's study of the *popolino* in Naples (1996) analysed the complex relationship between work ethic, family and neighbourhood in the context of strong continuous interaction between material and non-material pursuits in the entrepreneurial actions of ordinary Neapolitans. Pardo's detailed ethnography shows how they manage their lives by relying on different moral systems and abiding to their spiritual obligations. Gill's ethnography on *yoseba* workers (2001) — day labourers in construction and stevedoring — brought out the experience of precarious work in relation to making a living in the contemporary post-industrial city of Yokohama, Japan. Gill explored their informal work activities and their response to street-level realities. Mollona's research (2009) on two steel factories in Sheffield, U.K. discussed the work experience of local steelworkers', demonstrating how their daily struggle for survival challenges the normalising system within which they are embedded and highlights the practical philosophy they follow in order to make a living in a de-industrialized, post-Keynesian Britain.

Of utmost importance in all these cases is the relationship between employment trajectories and the formation of a working identity, which in turn leads to a strong work ethic and entrepreneurial morality while the actors struggle to make ends meet. In addition, other issues come to the fore, such as the relation between structure and action, political decision-making and reactionary practices, forms of work and identity, conventional economic processes and survival strategies, and especially the relation between making a living and the inadequacy of state intervention. These issues are hotly debated, pointing out that workers follow diverse paths in order to increase their employment opportunities and that they produce narratives of survival which enable them to cope with the impact of extreme situations, as Procoli would put it (2004: 4).

With the economic recession in full bloom, the ethnographic material that I discuss here, alongside other sociological data, can help us understand how Keranis workers are embedded in a generalised trend of increasing momentum marking the transition from a condition of relative affluence to one dominated by increasing employment insecurity. Former Keranis workers are forced to earn their living in a neo-liberal context of acute labour

market deregulation and diminishing social protections. From this point of view they experience a kind of ‘revolving door’ situation: being unemployed, they have no real choice but to settle for unsatisfactory, non-standard jobs. They run a considerable risk of being underemployed and getting low earnings for long periods of time.²

The sociological significance of employment deprivation continues to be best informed by the comprehensive study of Marienthal community carried out by Marie Jahoda et al. in 1933. Briefly put, according to this study, unemployed people also suffer from the loss of time structure, social contacts outside their families, a sense of collective purpose, self-esteem, and regular activity (see Jahoda et al. 2010). A very important indirect finding of the study was that unemployment is not a ‘natural’ effect of an ‘invisible hand’ but the outcome of specific economic and political processes over which workers had little influence. Unemployed people, however, became desperate and apathetic only after they failed in attempts to preserve their working identity by finding another job. Additionally, this study showed that employment is one of the main links between people and the wider society (Edgell 2009: 107).

Likewise, former tobacco workers struggle to make ends meet by relying on an identity formed throughout their working careers, and attempt to found their future on their own means of survival within a precarious and uncertain context. After many years of employment in the tobacco factory, and having programmed their lives on the basis of its market prosperity, these workers experienced an unexpected, though not sudden, shut-down which downgraded them in material and social terms. The case study that follows demonstrates that although personal characteristics do play an important role in one’s working career, they cannot by themselves justify either the level or the qualitative dimensions of unemployment. In line with relevant sociological findings (see Gallie and Vogler 1994: 124; Gallie and Paugam 2000: 357; Edgell 2009:105) it also offers qualitative evidence of unemployed people’s significant commitment to the work ethic as, at the same time, they struggle to improve and manipulate the harsh conditions of their existence.

Work and Community

Anthropological analysis has demonstrated the central role that work plays in the lives of people as members of local working class communities by (see Howe 1990; Blim 1992). Belonging to a local community involves disadvantages and advantages, as workers tied to

² For a social policy perspective on this EU-wide trend, see Gray 2004.

their locality cannot be as mobile as capital. On the other hand, community ties involve socially significant networks affecting people's working trajectories and identities (see Grieco 1987). These social relations personalize labour relations and situate what the symbolic interactionist tradition calls 'perceived environment'; that is, the way in which agents construct their views and experience the context within which they act (Scott 2000: 11).

Yiannis had been working at Keranis since 1979 as a chemical foreman. He graduated from a private training school in Piraeus and is one of the lucky workers to have reached retirement by buying off his military service time. The process which led to Yiannis' employment in the company was not much different from that of his co-workers. In his own words, 'I used to pass by Keranis when I worked in another factory; I would see the building and say "Right. How can they stand to work in here? This place is like a prison". Who would have thought that one day I, too, would pass the same gate — blame it on our family problems. Anyway, I got in; an uncle of my wife knew someone in the company, so I met with him, we talked things over and they took me in. After four years or so, I was promoted as a quality control supervisor'.

Like the vast majority of Keranis workers, Yiannis exploited the extensive local social networks to find a job. This customary practice, especially from the employer's side (see Carrier 1997), reveals the company's core economic and social importance for the city of Piraeus, as well as the organizational culture governing the factory. As another informant, Maria, puts it, after having worked for 26 years in quality control department since 1982, 'I got into the company with the help of my uncle. He used to work in the administration office, as the head of external economic affairs. Most of the workers there had been hired through their acquaintances — we're talking whole families and generations here, and this was the rule, especially in good times. Just imagine, the whole street was buzzing at the end of our shift — so many were the workers'.

This industry did not merely produce cigarettes. It also contributed, along with the rest of the local industrial activity (see Spyridakis 2011), to the formation of the local social working identity. Most of its workers lived in the neighbourhoods of Piraeus. The social network that provided the company's workforce almost \geographically mirrored the central urban tissue of Piraeus, indicating that the workplace shaped a specific community of urban labourers that extended beyond the factory's premises.

Mihalis had been 'receiving his insurance stamps' after having worked at Keranis for 24 years since 1983, with his last wages dating back to 2005. He is now 55-years-old. Before

joining the company, he had had several jobs, for at the start of his working life, in 1972, Piraeus bristled with industrial activity. In his words, ‘I finished an economics training school. I liked accounting but my peers led me off course, so I enrolled in a technical school where I graduated as an engineering foreman. My friends told me that in this way I would earn more money. Indeed, I would walk down the main street and it would be full of machine shops. My specialization was popular back then, especially in the 70s and 80s. I used to work when I was a student, since I was 17, in small machinery shops, eventually ending up in the cable making industry. You wouldn’t go out of job back then; it wasn’t like now, that everything’s closing down — and this is because my specialty is dead. Back then there was always work; after technical school, you were employed right away, and on good terms. I have been receiving insurance stamps since then, although, to be honest, back then I didn’t value them that much. After that, with a friend of mine, we opened a garage. It was going well, until car recycling began and business went slack for a year and a half because everyone bought new cars. We got into debt and went bankrupt. Thankfully, my father worked at Keranis — he had just left a smithy, which had also closed down. A friend of his invited him to work at Keranis and since the guy also knew me, when I came into hard times he said “Why don’t you come, there’s a lot of people retiring all the time”. And so it was that I joined the company: there were one thousand workers, 15-20 of them retiring each month. Most of them had been taken in after the war and many got their own children in there — lots of people down in Piraeus made a living working for the factory. I joined in 1983. In 1987, seven hundred people left the company, but there were few intakes as after 1985 they kept cutting down on people’.

Clearly, the tobacco industry contributed to the preservation and refreshment of the existing social networks. Their inflow was regulated by the needs and the extension of the company’s economic activity cycle, as it was standard practice to recruit workers mainly through the aforementioned networks. Maria explains, ‘I came from a poor agricultural family in Epirus. I moved to Athens because the production up north wasn’t going that well. At first, I stayed at my aunt’s in Drapetsona. Her daughter worked at Keranis, but quit her job after she became pregnant. So I took over her post. There were several vacancies. Back then lots of people were hired but few of them stayed because it was a heavy work, steeped in tobacco and its smell all day long — it was hard to bear, especially when you’re pregnant. Just imagine, work was so heavy that, of the 40 people that were employed in 1980 only ten remained — the others were not sacked, they just walked away, seeking jobs elsewhere. I thought I’d stay. I was happy, although my father objected to it; I also met my husband, who

worked at the Piraeus mills, so I stayed. I was twenty years old when I started; it was my first and only job — a whole life in it’.

From these informants’ accounts, it is obvious that Keranis industry was not an impersonal workplace; it was a meeting hub for the employment trajectories of daily labourers; that is, the most numerous rank on the company’s payroll. Georgia, who worked in the company since the age of 14, in cigarette packaging, recounts: ‘I lived a whole life in there. I saw many things. I’ve never been to University and such. I’m just elementary school level but I know how to tell people apart, what’s their blend. Well, no matter how many supervisors we had, no matter what, if the common labourer doesn’t work, the production isn’t going to get through. The worker is the engine, if it wasn’t for us, if we didn’t know the whims of every machine in there, there was no way the production would ever get through, even with the best will in the world — us workers, being the most in there, we knew this kind of things’.

Working in the tobacco factory played a central ideological and cultural role in the workers’ everyday life. It outlined the symbolic vehicle of their very existence and working consciousness, as it guaranteed them employment security and provided the grounds for the social aspects of labour relations. This view was systematically encouraged by the employers, who aimed to cultivate an environment of trust combined with a family-based organizational model, thus ensuring a smooth operational capacity, while subtly grooming their future workforce, which was mostly hand-picked from the networked labour pool of Piraeus. In this regard, anthropological research has demonstrated and underlined the symbolic centrality of working places and processes in the everyday life of the agents, who tend to associate their identity and life with them (see Cohen 1979; Doukas 2003, Mollona 2009). On the other hand, this condition is even more prominently highlighted when industrial activity, emblematic for a whole city and working trajectories, ‘dies out’, as Maria put it.

Downward Social Mobility

After 2007, Keranis workers were gradually phased into a regime of continuous job insecurity and persistent degradation of paid labour, resulting for most of them into a process of downward social mobility. According to Newman, who researched former Singer workers in Elizabeth, U.S.A (1999), the plant’s shut-down was associated with the town’s changing identity and with the abandonment of core values, such as the faith in steady, well-paid work as a moral reward for hard working people who viewed themselves as being at the mercy of

remote decision makers. One of the main findings was that as soon as economic displacement struck, it did not only shock the individual's sense of position but also weakened his own sense of progress and sociability (Newman 1999: 231).

Forty five year old Loukas, had been a production operator at Keranis for twenty three years. 'I prefer the factory' he remarked, 'you know what's what, come hell or high water, you get there, you leave, you do your shift and you're alright. But it's not just that, when the money rolls, you're made, you make plans, you're OK, you feel safe and that's important. Production will get through, no question about it, no matter what's going on in the factory, but you'll get through too. And let me tell you, back in '84, when I started, there wasn't only Keranis; there were machinery shops, there were other industries as well, that offered jobs to people. Try looking for a job now, children and bills to take care of, this whole thing has dried up, Piraeus is in serious trouble'

The gradual decline of industrial activity in Piraeus, and particularly the demise of Keranis,, signals the end of a certain kind of working life and the consequent dissolution of social bonds that had been forged on the basis of community residence and employment. As Loukas explains, 'I could find my way to the factory blind-folded, go in and start working. It wasn't just that. We made friends there, we went out, we watched the footie and we went to field trips together; the mood was good. Before my friend that I was telling you about got me in, most people in the neighbourhood had already been working at Keranis, and I had heard nothing bad about it; they all said it was like working in a bank. It's a twenty minute walk from here. Now we still stay in contact, mostly on the phone; we are all on our own now'.

Loukas is considered one of the lucky few, as he managed to find a job as an engineer at the Bic factory, in razor production. However he is one of a small minority, just one of the few who made it — one of a 'handful of people', as he says. The majority of his former co-workers continue to experience the hardship of unemployment, for they did not merely lose their jobs but also a crucial part of their identity, founded on their labour activity and their place of residence. Sociological and anthropological research on industrial areas (see Jahoda et al. 2010; Newman 1999, Doukas 2003; Mollona 2009) suggests that where the place of residence is formly tied to the workplace, the economic shut-down has cruel implications for the life of the local community. Possibly the worst among those implications, Newman suggests, is after being deprived of several privileges, like insurance and pension, ex-workers are faced with the realization that their lives are now equated with those of poor working-class people rather than those of the middle-class. Although they do have the means to

survive, they realize that mere survival is not enough (Newman 1999: 238). In a similar vein, Mollona pointed out that the workers he studied in Sheffield were alienated because they failed to take into account the broader capitalist forces behind their social reproduction and only became aware of such forces in traumatic personal moments (Mollona 2009: 175). In this regard, Loukas explains: ‘For a working man like me, at my age, the worst thing that can happen is staying out of work. You grow accustomed to a different way of life. I hadn’t been living glamorously, but I had it pretty well, no problems at all. I had a car and a motorbike, I also had a child – all these because I had a job. As soon as they cut you off, the speed counter resets to zero. You have to do it all over again and that’s the worst part. You would take jobs with lower wages, never mentioning your previous one when haggling with the boss. When talking with a guy just down the street, I was told something I hadn’t really thought about – that I’m too young to lose my job and too old to find another. I really had a hard time finding one; I’ve done three different jobs so far. Of course, I could manage with lower wages. As for the rest of us, they will take any odd job, in supermarkets, in the street-market, in security companies, wherever they can, just to make sure they will get through the week — not the whole month, mind you; as they live their lives in portions . . .’

On the other hand, the experience of being jobless is not the same for everybody, since it is crucially influenced by one’s employment record, age, gender, as well as each individual’s existing social capital. For example, Yiannis made it to retirement age after wisely managing his finances — as he had ‘stashed some money’ — and called upon his mother-in-law for help when ‘supplies ran dry’. His recovery was aided by the fact that he already owned a house — part of his wife’s dowry — while his children, having graduated from university, had been working as private tutors, thus contributing to the household income/ This was also the case with Mihalis, who currently is patiently waiting to reach retirement age and get his pension. However, many of Loukas’ acquaintances still have a long way to go. As he says, ‘I’m lucky to have found a job. Most people I know will take cash-in-hand jobs, like I told you, but such jobs won’t do you any good if you don’t have some other kind of financial support. I know some co-workers with bills outstanding since they bought their house, who also suffer from heart problems. My best buddy, despite his non-smoking life, got cancer — what do you expect, it’s not that simple, it does you in’.

The implications of unemployment for physical and psychological health have already been noted by some researchers (see Ashton 1986: 137), and these affects extend to the perception of time as well as of roles in the family. Anastasia, who had been employed since

1982 in the company's quality control department, explained, 'I managed to raise my children in time; I had a schedule, both in my life and my work. I worked in shifts, but I was used to it, everything worked like a charm. Of course, I did the housework too. Would you now believe that I am totally unable to sleep? I wake up at the time when I used to go to work, experiencing a void. I still do the housework, but now it is even more tiring than before because it is an endless routine. I am trying to reorganize myself but I have a hard time doing it. As the time goes by, I only want to forget. I don't want to contact any co-worker of mine, I simply want to forget'.

Employment deprivation disorganizes the concept of time along with all the activities that the individual no longer regards as rewarding. As for established social roles, they seem to remain unchanged in the condition of unemployment; indeed, as sociological research has shown (see Morris 1985), they become even more prominent. Giorgos, who had been working in the company since 1980 as a chemical foreman, says, 'In the private sector, you can never be certain that you will work at the same place forever. I, for one, never believed so. I just found myself trapped in here because I wouldn't want to give away so many years of work – I wanted my compensation. Now, that things are difficult, I have waded in the market to find something else. But it's not that easy; now, at the age of 55, no one will hire me. The worst part is when I go back home; I don't like being supported by my wife — thankfully she has a job. This is not what I was used to. I made money and brought it home. She won't complain, but I don't feel right about it. Alright, I could go and work somewhere else, do something different, but it is not easy to work the way that many others do, without insurance stamps, and doing unregistered labour for 600 Euro or less – I do deserve a decent retirement'.

Giorgios' account reveals that the main difficulty that the unemployed face is financial confinement as well as the forced choice of underemployment. Former Keranis workers broadly fall into three categories: those that are just a step from retirement or are already enjoying their pension; those that have already found a standard employment; and, the most numerous, those who are underemployed. The concept of underemployment encompasses some forms of non-standard work which do not usually require special skills and are low-paid. In many cases, they are marked by unregistered employment and involve exceptionally vulnerable work groups, such as women, the young and the unemployed. In the current economic scenario, these forms of work are constantly increasing, due to the instability of the job market, and business-imposed policies. Both of these factors decrease available options for workers and sharply conflict with their interests (Edgell 2009: 117). The case of the

Keranis unemployed is typical, as the vast majority of workers see their efforts to re-enter standard employment frustrated by the combination of their age and extended unemployment. Tasos, who had been working at Keranis as an electrician for 32 years, explains, ‘As soon as I realized, after the lock-out, that there was no hope with the factory, I started looking for a job. You know, things are very tough, not only because I am now considered too old, but also because they don’t want experienced labourers any more. They prefer younger people, because they can pay them less and are easier to sack. So I freaked out and started sending CVs everywhere. In the meanwhile I started working with a friend of mine in construction — you know, I was doing all the electrical installations — no social security, no nothing, informally, just to get myself through. I lasted for six months, there’s no comparison with the factory, being out in the cold. As construction business also took a fall, I joined a limestone processing company. Just before the end of my six-month contract, I got the “calling card” for my discharge. When I asked for an explanation, they told me I was too costly, because of my working record and my children. I replied “what you want me to do with them, kill them?” So I got the boot there too. Now, just to get through, I will take cash-in-hand jobs in shipbuilding; anything really, a general duties person, so to speak. As of late, for a week I haven’t been summoned and I’m worried about it. I feel tremendous insecurity, again I tried sending CVs and again I was invited to interviews, but my age and my experience are always a deal-breaker. If we ever get our money from the forced sale, I’m thinking of doing something on my own. But until then... Not to mention that all jobs in Greece are fixed. If you don’t know someone, your chances are slim, this is how it works here, from politics to jobs — everything’s fixed’.

What this informant makes perfectly clear, in agreement with social policy research findings (see Cremer-Schäfer 2007), is that despite the effort to find a job by trying to fit the requirements of the local labour market and showing a great deal of flexibility in changing short time jobs, he has failed to regain permanent employment. It seems that in a fluctuating labour market the willingness to work hard for a better life is not enough to protect individuals from redundancy. The point, I stress, is that unemployed people are forced to experience a ‘revolving door’ process and are driven to learn how to deal with constant failure, despite their adherence to the work ethic and their attempt to sustain an image of being needed and fulfilling social expectations. Thus they join a ‘reserve army’ of skilled and flexible labour hands whose value, however, is devalued in the context of a deregulated labour market. As Newman puts it (1999: 239), the supporters of Adam Smith’s *laissez-faire*

principles would conclude that the situation described above is the natural outcome of the market society. It can ensure life-long comfort and stability to no one. Of course the question remains open as to the cost that downward social mobility imposes on the families of workers as well as the rest of the society.

Social Protection

Exploring the degree of marginalization of the unemployed by the labour market, Gallie and Paugam (2000) argued that even when social welfare benefits appear to be quite generous to them workers do not abandon their work ethic, and show a strong tendency to seek employment. This is true for Keranis workers, who are currently facing the risk of poverty because social protection in the current Greek social policy context is minimal (Edgell 2009: 114). This condition results in involuntary non-standard and informal forms of work; that is, disguised unemployment. On the other hand, as we have seen, active labour market policies — which are viewed by the dominant discourse in the E.U. as panaceas for re-employment — do not seem to be effective (see Gray 2004). Emphasizing this point, Takis, a machinist that had been working at Keranis for sixteen years as a packaging machine operator, explains: ‘Look, few of us have managed to get a good job. Most are in my shoes; we will take any job available to get through and somewhat fill in our income. The State can do little to help, they cannot – do what exactly? Make the bosses take us in? Out of the question, such things– let alone we wouldn’t want that. But we would have expected from them a more solid support, instead of their big words. They had been duping us, spreading word of an investor, then some other; so we got sick of it and went into lock-out. What the State did was to offer us a one-time benefit of three thousand Euro and Vocational Training seminars. Those things are just rubbish; everybody knows it, even our teachers there. And let me tell you, what would I do with computers and such in my age? Who’s going to take me in? We all went in, got the dough and left’.

Takis’ experience confirms the dubious effectiveness of Vocational Training programs, which in theory aim to rehabilitate the unemployed. Their very rationale conflicts with the reality of the labour market (see Pappas 1989: 53). On the other hand, it is noteworthy to mention that the workers themselves undertook these initiatives through their own union in an attempt to overcome, even marginally, the conditions to which they had been subjected, while at the same time viewing state protection mechanisms as bureaucratic and unreliable. The predominant opinion among workers on the services for the unemployed provided by the

Greek Manpower Employment Organization (O.A.E.D.) is revealing. Giorgos attests: ‘I went down to OAED for an unemployment card because I had to. I sat down in the office of one of those employment consultants, and you know what he said? “I don’t trust you expect finding a job here!” He was on a fixed term contract, why should he care about me or the rest of us? If he could find a better place, he would just take off! He had me fill in my CV so he could forward it. What can I say, I know I have a good CV, and he agreed on that. What use is this, I can find no job. The way those people work, they’re just useless’.

During their talks with the relevant authorities, the Ministry of Labour and OAED, former ‘Keranis’ workers made a series of suggestions aimed at obtaining temporary financial support until they could get their legal compensations and the wages due to them — which, in most cases, tally up to four years-worth of wages —³ from the forced sale of the company’s assets. They obtained financial support worth 1,000 Euros over the years between 2005 and 2007, payable thrice per six months, from the Special Fund for Employment and Vocational Training (L.A.E.K.). Also, they requested a 500-hour paid program of Vocational Training during the years 2006 and 2007 concerning training in accounting, electrical work, natural gas and computers. Since 2007, the union initiated a new cycle of negotiations with the Ministry of Labour, in the light of the special liquidation status, which identifies the former workers as discharged. The union requested a full intervention in favour of those who had not yet been able to find a job consisting of the following: first, a special benefit for the employers that would employ former ‘Keranis’ workers; second, an increased benefit for those ex-workers who wished to start their own business; third, a repetition of the Vocational Training courses for those who were still unemployed; fourth, awarding of points for the A.S.E.P. (Supreme Council for Civil Personnel Selection) exams; and fifth, admission into the Special Fund of Social Solidarity.⁴ Regarding the first two requests, there was no special treatment of the unemployed, hence they were granted the standard benefit that is provided to every unemployed person, with the special bonus that, even in case of redundancy of those eligible,

³ The financial demands of the employees range between 60,000 and 180,000 Euro, depending on their longevity in the company.

⁴ Under the law 3552/2007 (OGG 77 A’), within the Greek Manpower Employment Organization, an independent organization has been established under the name “Special Fund of Social Solidarity”, with the aim of providing financial support and social protection for the long-term unemployed and for those discharged following restructuration of the businesses that employed them, conditional to them facing considerable difficulty to re-enter the job market and to them being close to retirement age.

the Keranis workers would be fully covered. The Ministry decided to put aside the fourth request because a special legislative regulation would be needed. Regarding their fifth request, the Ministry of Labour assured the workers that they would be included in the Fund's provisions, which would offer an essential relief to a considerable number of them. According to those provisions, those who had completed 7,500 insurance stamps and were over the age of 50 could make their way towards retirement enjoying a 5-year benefit of 900 Euro gross. These provisions are applied in areas with high unemployment levels and declining economic activity. Although Piraeus has high unemployment levels and tobacco industrial activities in Greece are declining, the former Keranis workers never obtained the aforementioned benefit, due to the lack of state funds. Finally, regarding their request for the repetition of Vocational Training, the OAED argued that, since it had already taken place, they would have to find jobs in order to accrue a benefit for their employment, not their unemployment. However, as the labour market in Piraeus area is rather adverse, most employers would not risk committing themselves to programs for the employment of benefited labourers, since they would be obliged to abstain from any reduction in their personnel for two years. Therefore, this argument is useless from the employers' point of view.

Thus, apart from the potential benefits from the forced sale procedure, the former Keranis workers do not have much to hope for. Marooned in the vicious circle of underemployment, they grudgingly accept signing waivers of their employment record in order to ensure meager financial support. From dire necessity, they submit to the whims of employers' and thereby remain unemployed, or without a steady job, for long periods of time. Moreover, as we have seen, most of their skills are no longer sought after by the local labour market (notably, packaging and cigarette-making machine operators). The problem is even more acute for the female workforce. Very few of the female technicians have managed to find even casual jobs in the local shipbuilding and repairing industry and are considered to be unskilled workers in terms of labour market requirements. The main problem is that the vast majority of former Keranis workers have already completed the number of insurance stamps required for a pension, but they still are not eligible for retirement. Consequently, their main concern is how they can meet the terms of their social reproduction until then.

Conclusions

The ethnographic case of the former Keranis workers could be seen as an example of the way social disadvantage emerges and operates in the context of a permanently waning welfare

state. Job loss affects the actors' subsistence system as a whole, as it is defined by the combination of vocational activity, family and local community. As informants' accounts have shown, the loss of employment has forced them to experience downward social mobility in these social fields. At the same time, restrictive labour market conditions have redefined the perception of labour as well as the concept of vocational skills. In this light, the 'invisible hand' does not distribute social disadvantage and inequality in a socially fair way (Cremer-Schäfer 2007: 146); instead, it coerces agents to enter into vulnerable social groups.

The Keranis case also indicates that agents do not passively accept the conditions created by market forces. It testifies to the ways in which they struggle to ensure the terms of their social reproduction, either by demanding what they believe they are entitled to or, *ex necessitas*, by submitting to various forms of non-standard work acting both realistically while trying to preserve their work ethic and identity.

The post-industrial welfare policy seems incapable of facing the problem that, well beyond mere statistics, finds an increasing number of labourers at risk of finding themselves at the threshold of poverty and social exclusion. As this ethnography shows, neither non-standard employment nor the market itself can protect workers from uncertainty and precariousness unless a relevant comprehensive public policy is devised (Durrenberger and Martí 2006: 16). To put it bluntly, cases such as the failure of Keranis tobacco industry directly call into question the Western cultural model's fundamental faith in progress, its rhetoric of success as well as claims of meritocracy. As research has shown (Yates 2003; Gray 2004), the increasing number of people being driven out of steady paid employment and benefits tells us that these people are not the dispensable collateral damage of this model; they and their conditions are its inherent structural effect.

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