
*Living in Precariousness: The Minimum Guaranteed Income in Crisis*¹

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Although the precise meaning of precariousness is blurred, it refers, in general, to the creation of insecure and uncertain conditions of existence as the result of remote decisions made at the expense of ordinary people's lives. Therefore, it encompasses not only non-standard employment and bad labour conditions but life itself. It is about a situation of vulnerability where people cannot schedule their future and tend to be socially isolated and materially deprived, doing short and dead-end jobs and being forced to find recourses in social programmes schemes in order to make a living. Far from being a homogeneous category, precarious people on the verge of vulnerability can be seen as 'second class' citizenry since they are denied a range of rights, the main being equal access to forms of protection and equal possibility to live with dignity. Based on ethnographic research in Athens, this article discusses the experience of precarious people who have provisional recourse in the Minimum Guarantee Income established by the Greek authorities during the economic crisis.

Keywords: Precariousness, Minimum Guarantee Income, urban Greece, vulnerability, ethnography.

Introduction

Precarization is currently a term very much heard and theoretically approached (Armano et al. 2017). As argued elsewhere (Spyridakis 2011, 2018), it refers to the creation of insecure and uncertain conditions of existence as the result of remote decisions made at the expense of ordinary people's lives' trajectories. Hence, the term encompasses not only non-standard employment and worse labour conditions but life itself. As Lorey points out, 'Precarization means more than insecure jobs, more than the lack of security given by waged employment. By way of insecurity and danger it embraces the whole of existence, the body, modes of subjectivation' (Lorey 2015: 1). Precarization is strongly connected to a status of vulnerability where people cannot schedule their future lives, they tend to be isolated and socially excluded, doing short and dead-end jobs and mostly they are forced to find recourse on public programs schemes in order to get by. Far from being a homogeneous category, precarious people can be thought of as 'second class' citizens since they are denied a range of rights, the main being equal access to forms of protection and equal possibility to live with dignity. They are the 'product' of a process that owes much to the way the global market works which, backed by political decisions made by neoliberal governments, commodifies fully and intensively every aspect of human life, eroding regulated safety nets and making a norm the reproduction of labour power as pure commodity disconnected from society. In this view, Bauman argues that precarious people are people who are rejected from the process of consumption; they are imperfect consumers and for this reason they are deemed incompetent to meet the perceived as hallmark of contemporary 'freedom' — that is, choice. To the extent that precarious people have no role in contemporary society, they 'serve' as the negative examples of personal failure and of useless, redundant workforce in a very delicate cloaked form (Bauman 1998).

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As far as Greece is concerned, precariousness is strongly connected with neoliberally inspired policies which, especially by 2010, took the form of imposed economic austerity, internal devaluation and reductions in public deficit and spending in exchange for financial support from IMF, EC and ECB and lately ESM, which worsened an already problematic economy. For instance, according to Gini's indicator terms, in 2015 the income of the wealthiest 20% of the population is 6.6 larger than that of the poorest 20%. Moreover, according to Eurostat, today Greece has the highest unemployment percentage (18.5% in February 2019) in the Eurozone. Figures apart, the present study is based on a qualitative ethnographic research that was carried out in Athens among forty interlocutors eligible for the Minimum Guaranteed Income during the last year of the Greek version of the so-called 'memorandum of understanding'. The main aspects of the research were concerned with, 1) the agents' relation with remote processes and decision-making; 2) the possible change in their life style as a consequence of material and social deprivation; 3) their perceptions of the unexpected transition to a new living regime and the realization of their social reproduction; 4) their views about whether the new condition would radically change their social and economic orientation; 5) the means at their disposal for starting a new life course; 6) their strategy in dealing with the vibrations of their new condition; 7) their interpretation of their unintentional downward spiral; 8) and the way in which their cultural background informs their possible struggle for a different course of life.

Crisis and Social Reproduction

The narratives of the informants brought to the fore the process of violent and unwitting transition from a relatively safe-living condition to a regime of social uncertainty and employment precariousness, in which the only standards of their social reproduction are the adverse effects that the economic crisis has injected in their lives. One of the most important is the loss of work combined with the extremely unlikely perspective of finding a new one. As shown by the narratives of their working trajectories, they have left behind a period where their life plan used to be more or less specific, their living resources were relatively secure and their future programme was generally seen as feasible. It seems, however, paradoxical that the more they used to struggle to make a living in the period of 'affluence', the more they have to make a dubious (in terms of efficacy) effort to meet their actual needs.

The informants do not belong, in material terms, to any privileged social category of haves, possessing either capital or means of production, so as to be — and stay — unburdened by the daily struggle for survival. On the contrary, they form part of the social category that, for analytical reasons, is identified with the petty bourgeoisie. On the basis of demographic characteristics, this category used to include salaried workers, middle rank executives, self-employed workers, workers in family business or medium sized businesses, 'knowledge' workers; people, that is, who were mainly interested in a dignified survival rather than in the accumulation of capital. It is for this reason that in their narratives they do not blame the market economy system, although they very accurately outline the mechanism of their transition to a

vulnerable context in material and social terms. This confirms empirically E. P. Thompson's thesis (1978) that, although the class experience seems to be determinant, class consciousness is not; the informants used to belong to the same, more or less, relatively prosperous social class and they have different perceptions both about the trajectories of their lives and their lived experience, though not in terms of class consciousness. According to E. P. Thompson, if one wants to avoid monolithic causal explanations, one needs to enrich the analytical tools of the classical political — such as use value, exchange value, monetary value and surplus value — with another tool; that is, the cultural value. In this light, the interlocutors of the research are agents who experience deterministic conditions and relationships as inalienable needs, interests and antagonisms, and then 'manage' this experience through the context of their consciousness and culture in the most complex way (often but not always through the resulting class structures), acting on the conditions that determine them (Thompson 1978). Hence, as Wright (1982) would put it, they find themselves in a contradictory class position as they are either highly skilled or highly autonomous individuals who have been going through a dynamic trajectory related to the social division of labour. On the one hand, they did not fully belong to the working class at the time of relative prosperity; on the other hand, they are currently being steadily and gradually proletarianized. The volatility of their social status and lifestyle has been increased especially during the current recession, making, as Kalb (2015) has pointed out, ethnographic research the best approach to highlight and trace the dynamic multiplicity of the social class, as opposed its deterministic classifications (Spyridakis 2017).

From this point of view, what was clear from the informants' narratives was the very concept of social reproduction at the core value of the labour power. The agents that participated in the research have been part of a mechanism that annihilates the value of this power and, therefore, they cannot exchange it in the market and be considered as 'perfect consumers'. In fact, they inadvertently move away from the way they have 'learned' to make a living. To this, one should add the specific political and economic conditions that are facilitating a better control of their lives for some while taking it away from others, the majority of whom are differently categorized in the downward spiral caused by the crisis in their social reproduction (Narotzky 2016). As the labour force is devalued, a new reserve labour army is created in a threatening and rigid way, as Marx (2013) would remind us.

It goes almost without saying that the interlocutors of the present study had long ago 'discovered' and experienced in their working lives the dangers and instabilities of the market economy as well as the tragic irony of the negative effects of the current 'flexible' post-industrial period. They have been and continue to be employable, and attempt to enter the labour market through a set of techniques, qualities and work experiences. Having developed the empirical know-how through their daily struggle for survival and for social ascendance, they continue to be adaptable to market shocks and fluctuations, for they simply cannot do otherwise. They have tried to negotiate through an entrepreneurial logic — not in the market sense but in the sense of taking risks to earn their lives — their labour power in an extremely inexorable, inhumane and effort-consuming economic context. They do not face life-critical conditions for

the first-time. As it is clear from their narratives, which tally with other significant ethnographies (Pardo 1996), in an unequal system of social and economic relations they work with imaginative skill, experiential know-how and empirical flexibility to improve the terms and the conditions of reproduction of their own lives. They did so before the economic downturn as well as during it.

At the same time, it seems that their class position does not help them to cope with the crisis. The overwhelming majority of interlocutors, having been exposed to market imbalances before the crisis, had the potential to create the necessary framework to secure, in material terms, the economic choices that would lead to the best possible social reproduction level. This, however, did not by any means mean that they were living in a fully safe context. They had to struggle constantly to avoid the difficulties that most of them experience in the current precarious time. Their vulnerability has always been present because the course of their lives, where the daily micro-level routine is affected by remote decision-making processes in the political and economic sphere at the macro-level, has shown that the market economy is anything but a self-regulating mechanism (De Grauwe 2017), as the dominant perception of the conventional economists would claim. If one takes the view that the market becomes ineffective because of external factors, then one would seem to attribute to the economy theocratic characteristics and, above all, explain this situation by blaming the wrong choices made by its rational players. Several ethnographies (Pardo 1996, Durrenberger 2017), as well as the present one, clearly show that agents think in less paradoxical terms; that they act in a framework of social and cultural rationality rather than in a purely economic one. It is this rationality that helped the informants to stand on their feet and to prosper relatively in a truly timeless economic context — as Sahlins (1976) would put it, people do not just survive; they survive in a certain way.

In this sense, it is of particular importance to approach the current crisis, and any crisis in general, in a diachronic light, as the result of specific processes, decisions and conditions. This is because, as Roitman (2014) indicates, today the word ‘crisis’ is often heard and analysed in such a way as to gain a self-explanatory meaning: people experience vulnerability because there is a crisis; and, because there is a crisis, there is vulnerability! The present study, though not aiming primarily at producing an economic analysis of the current situation, has shown through the ethnographic testimonies of the unintentional protagonists of precariousness that the ‘crisis’ is a factor endogenous to the functioning of the capitalist system. Significantly, as shown by relevant studies (Amin 2013), the market economy has been operating in this way since the 17th century.

The Minimum Guaranteed Income Experience

In the early 2000s European countries began to favour programmes like the Minimum Guaranteed Income (M.G.I.), to secure as much as possible the social reproduction process of their vulnerable citizens. According to Pena Casas (2006), the Minimum Guaranteed Income programmes in Europe have the following characteristics:

1. They are guaranteed and non-participatory; they are granted on an overall scale and not according to citizens' contributions to social protection insurance systems;
2. They constitute a 'minimum' income, functioning as a social security net and relating to national and local perceptions of minimum living standards;
3. They are the manifestation of a subjective as well as non-discretionary right to social security which is not automatically granted and needs to be applied for, while the amount of benefit claimable is defined by law or by administrative rules based on equality;
4. An amount of money is granted to beneficiaries according to their income which does not exceed a predefined standard threshold.

In the case of Greece, the main purpose of this programme is to tackle poverty, seen as the last obstacle to dynamic momentum; it is an attempt to enable citizens to participate actively in both society and the labour market. At the level of policy-making, this general direction is clearly guided by positive intentions on behalf of people who, especially in economic terms, have entered the difficult field of vulnerability. On the other hand, it is interesting to consider whether these intentions are in line with their practical application and, above all, whether this programme acts as a mechanism for reintegration into society and the economy.

In general, the informants who are eligible for the Minimum Guaranteed Income do not have a fully negative attitude of this scheme. They believe that despite the organizational shortcomings that until recently had arisen and the low economic value of this scheme, it is a 'better than nothing' benefit, especially in times of crisis. However, this benefit is stigmatizing at the same time that it helps. Vaso, an informant who experienced the effects of the crisis shortly before most people became fully aware of it, received the M.G.I. as a supplement to her husband's disability allowance. She explains:

'It is a peculiar situation because of the crisis we have been experiencing since 2006. What people have experienced since 2010, we felt earlier due to my husband's job. It happened suddenly, overnight, as people say anecdotally. He had his shop; he saw events occurring one after each other. We could pay the basic obligations. I personally [...] have my young son who is paraplegic and needs a lot of things which I cannot provide for him. He is too small. For the Social Solidarity Income, the child benefit we receive is income. The amount was removed because we get the bonus. I mean [...] Ok. I don't know. Perhaps for some these sums seem high for these days. This solidarity income helped a bit because the child is still using a diaper. Even one euro in the family is very important. We now get 140 euros. 70 on card and 70 on [...] It's very important. A package of diapers costs 12 euro, and I always try to get some discount. And not only this. Generally, children need things. Every day they need them. What to say. They are constantly complaining that: "We do not get that, we do not do that". "Up there we can get there. We do not have. We cannot do more". Ok, the truth is, we make great efforts

to get new clothes. As much as I remember, things that stigmatize you but you pass through it and you take power from them. You overcome it’.

Informants do not see the M.G.I. as a starting point for something new but as an aid which simply makes somehow easier the difficult life they live in the context of vulnerability. Once they have entered this context, they see the M.G.I. as economic supplement to what they can derive either from other benefits or from informal employment. On the other hand, as part of a more general, philanthropic rather than purely social policy measure, for the agents this income forms part of an unprecedented culture. Dimitris, an informant who had a taxi business before the crisis, said:

‘Anyway, I have gone through many such crises but this is the worst. I have not seen it before. I must go now to beg the grocery, to the pharmacy because I do not have money to take my medication at times. The only thing that comforts you, and that’s bad, is that you see many people like you when you come to get it. That is, yesterday we went to the Social Grocery store to get some rice, spaghetti and there were many people because I think they were taking goods from a similar program, the one about food assistance. The issue is that [...] you feel a bit so, at least I feel a little shame when I go but what else can I do, psychologically I feel what I feel, I never went to get something, I always gave to the church or to a neighbour, but I got to that point, it was not just me, I think I know a lot of people around me, in the neighbourhood that ended up far worse than me. I’ve seen them looking in the garbage at night. They went out in the evening so I was walking some days late and I watched them looking in the rubbish. People left bread in bags hung in the bins. But of course. I only have it for food. For clothes and the like I borrow from my sons or my brother. I accept it, I accept, I do not say no, since I need it’.

It seems that this income, as the last step before total impoverishment, does not inhibit the momentum of poverty, albeit temporarily, but also the activity of the agents. Agents are constrained to be disciplined to a particular living model, especially under the conditions imposed by this program, as opposed to designing something better for their lives. The ‘plans’ last as long as the income card. As an informant put it:

‘Now look dear Manos, you simply cannot manage with this amount. What you can do is so limited. Because cash is one thing. The other is buying. This card, of course, you buy what you want. It’s not like the solidarity bonus, and that, like the card they tell us to shop only, you buy what you want, clothes and whatever you want with the card, but [...]. It’s 400 euros only for me and they finish very soon, in the first five days, it’s over. Because when I take it, I owe to the pharmacy at least 60-70 euros, because I have to pay for my and my wife’s medicines. I leave the pharmacy and I go to the supermarket for the month’s shopping, meat and things like that. With the supermarket shopping you’re done and I’m not counting my daughter’s

clothing, in case she wants to buy something. She does not work. What to do? I wanted to help my son with his school, I simply couldn't'.

In the context of the vulnerability within which the informants struggle to survive day by day, this income has another one dimension as it reproduces poverty by forcing them to remain in the social place where they have been unwittingly categorized. It makes them entitled to the terms of the conditions of their social reproduction, as it ultimately pushes them in an unintentional condition and traps them there. This happens because, in this completely uncertain context, the M.G.I. is the most certain material element. So, instead of essentially activating the agents, it transforms them into micro-administrators of state policy. Harris, an IT specialist, comments extensively on how this policy, coupled with others designed for the 'poor', ultimately creates disincentives for activation as well as prerequisites for work in the informal sector. This condition is strikingly similar to the Italian situation described by Pardo (2018) on how financial and economic policies which are allegedly intended to help the poor or the unemployed do in fact disincentivize them and push them further in the informal sector. As an informant said:

'Half for supermarket, half cash. The child allowance comes in every three months. The months that we do not get it, we have a small problem (laughs) but, anyway at least it comes in. No other income officially exists. The other economic help we get comes from the grandmother, which is about 110-120 euros per month; so we pay the English lessons for the children. Eh, [...] and then we go to the, let's say, grey incomes from jobs like those I had this month. This month I collected 200 euros. The previous month, I raised 500. Next month, I do not know yet. Let's say, in the Summer [...] in June and August things are zero. We go to the village (laughs) we stay with the parents there, they feed us and we may get a job; we're lucky to raise, let's say, around 1000 euros so we can say that we made something. This may happen once a year. We may find any work for 6 months to work with 500 euros or 300 euros because, I tell you, 3 jobs I have changed these 5 years, and so on. Oh, and we are in the Minimum Guarantee Income because my wife is unemployed. Due to the crisis, we had to shut down the shop. We simply could not [...] cope with it. So, when we had the second child, we closed the shop. Of course, this regulation came in any case but [...] at least it does not raise the debt, we do everything we can and cannot get another job. Children are a very serious burden now; we cannot afford to look after them. On the other hand, we are sceptical about getting formal employment because we may lose this Income, according to the law. For the time being, our priority is our children, but this is still difficult'.

Governing the Vulnerable

It is in the context of this adverse economic canvas that, at least in the Greek case, the 'production' of vulnerable people should be seen, for the simple reason that precarization does not emerge out of parthenogenesis. Ironically, the 'rescue' policies that are imposed produce,

as Lorey puts it, the conditions that keep people's life precarious (Lorey 2015). Yet, the question remains, who exactly is the saviour? There are many candidates, the main being the four aforementioned so-called institutions. Keeping in mind the socially deleterious mixture of the policy which they implemented and which their internal 'machine politics' apparatus called necessary sacrifices, it seems that they bring to mind what Hanna Arendt describes as Kafka's castle; a place that is ruled by *Nobody*, but where decisions are made (Arendt 2012). The trick is an old one, as Ulysses taught us, but always works: *Nobody* means that literally no one has a specific responsibility for the decisions made since this entity helps in theory those who need badly to correct their own mistakes. In this light, as Chris Shore claims with reference to the similarly remote, untouchable and in essence undemocratic structure of decision making in the EU, 'with nobody left with who one can argue or to whom one could present one's grievances. This is perhaps the greatest danger of governance without government' (Shore 2006: 721). The degrading acronym, P.I.G.S. is but the relevant exemplary metonymy of a *Triste Tropiques* representing a specific way of governing and signifying a realm of economic and political experiments where governments, as a number of anthropological approaches have shown, succumb to the wills of supranational economic powers (whose members are not elected) organizing capital accumulation on a world scale (Narotzky 2016, Prato 2018, Pardo 2019). In this light, the notion of governing entails a polycentric state and a centreless society which, according to Shore's view resting on Foucault's ideas, is regulated and manipulated by market forces through vague processes of intra-institutional bargaining (Shore 2006), which have the power to impose and implement specific policies.

In addition, the narratives of the interlocutors have shown that this way of approaching inequality and the way it 'regulates' their fate play an important role at a theoretical level. This is connected with the fact that the views and actions of the agents in relation to their placement and their trajectory in the particular socio-economic system are shaped by varied and multi-dimensional social relations mediated, as Pardo (1996) would put it, by a process of constant identification and redefinition of the personal ventures, of the resources available and of the strategies practised. It seems that, here, Goffman's determination of the situation from the point of view of actors is extremely important (Goffman 1959). On the one hand, it shows, as does the ethnographic evidence, that the cumulative effect of personal strategies and experiences — which becomes a timelessly experienced condition — motivates action and social differentiation; on the other hand, it causes significant vibrations in the social system.

In this regard, the people who took part in this research do not opt for collective organized action against the structural mechanism of the market economy in order to cope with the crisis or even to challenge the existing system of power and power relations. At the same time, while sharing common values, such as faith in personal toil, equity, meritocracy and the fair distribution of wealth and even common practices, it seems clear that they are still following pre-crisis strategies based on their personal experience and on the way they have empirically 'learned' to interpret and face their participation in the world as obedient citizens. In addition to the values mentioned earlier, the range of this approach included the view that the difficulties

may be temporary, provided that one has the predisposition and the courage to confront them. It also included the concepts of trust and reciprocity in what was perceived as an intimate social network comprised of close relatives, friends, colleagues and partners; constant vigilance in order to predict market risks; belief in the value of expert knowledge and education as auxiliary elements for the fulfilment of one's dreams; and taking risks and making decisions in order to maintain and improve one's level of social reproduction.

Therefore, it is more than obvious that the co-dependent relationship between the notions of knowledge and bio-power as dominant political technologies in the modern mode of government shapes and subjectifies the 'active citizen'. At the same time, the power of knowledge creates a normalising imperative which influences the personal judgment and self-disposition of individuals as well as the disposition of social groups and populations based on intellectual technologies like social statistics, census taking, tables and graphs. The power of knowledge produces subjects and manipulated beings — as docile instruments — while it imposes itself as something natural through applied policies and leverage.

Analytical Reflections

So far, anthropology has not systematically engaged with several kinds of vulnerability. Anthropology, however, is in the unique position of analysing the rhetoric and the aims lurking behind policy programs devised by professional policy makers or, to put it differently, by those who have the power to define other people's lives (Pardo 2019, Pardo and Prato 2019). Hence, in line with Shore and Wright (1997), policies and their products, like the M.G.I., or Social Solidarity Income, are inherently and unequivocally *anthropological* phenomena. Not only do policies codify social norms and values, and articulate fundamental organizing principles of society, they also contain implicit (and sometimes explicit) models of society (Pardo 1996, Prato 2011, Pardo and Prato 2019).

Reading the M.G.I. legislation, one gets the impression that it is based on a simple equation: deprived and vulnerable beneficiary people plus assistance mechanism gives us in normative and irrevocable terms a positive result for society's homeostasis. Already a long time ago, however, not a poststructuralist, but Émile Durkheim drew our attention to social facts which, 'place constraints upon us, and yet we find satisfaction in the way they function, in that very constraint' (Durkheim 1982: 16). A social programme of this kind seeks to render vulnerability a natural condition by depoliticizing the changed structural conditions that have led to its increase and by mystifying the mechanism through which this has come into existence. For although it is true that globalisation is used as the aetiology toolkit for every evil in this world, it is also true that this usage obscures the specific responsibilities of a chain of politicians and economic experts who orchestrated the effects of the radical alteration of income distribution (Lyon-Callo and Brin Hyatt 2003).

As the economic account of the present crisis has shown, the production of precarization is not a natural process. It is, in essence, a product of a neoliberal political technology which praises the realm of market rationality where the fittest survive. The next step is to present the

vulnerable and the ‘weak’ in a series of censuses, thus creating tangible homogenised entities (Green 2006) who require philanthropic assistance, due to their own ‘inability’ to enter the culture of competition demanded by the market system. This is the experience of the Social Solidarity/Minimum Guaranteed Income, which has appeared to be based on a process of computation, knowledge and tactics that facilitates and legitimizes the exercise of specific and complex forms of power by attempting to manipulate the behaviour of the subjects (Pardo 2018, Spyridakis 2018). Therefore, a wide range of measurable elements, instructions, decision-making mechanisms, calculated supervision, management techniques, experts, and ‘good practices’ are mobilized to bring social problems to a neutral tone and to be removed from their political context using the realistic language of the ‘common good’. Thus, as the short ethnographic accounts given here have shown, no matter how much the precarious try to face the structural conditions of their existence, they are made invisible to society (Susser 1996); they are turned into a non-anomalous condition, by becoming the ‘other’, while remaining visible to the state’s clinical apparatus through a chain of policy makers who structure themselves by structuring others. In short, understanding the precarious ‘other’ presupposes understanding the way it is constructed and managed.

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