COVID-19: Full Teleworking in Greece

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Recent approaches to social cohesion suggest that solidarity in late modernity can be understood either as having various forms or as being an issue of recognition. Solidarity can take three forms: affective, conventional and reflective. Affective solidarity concerns traditional societies and is based on close relations through which the common 'we' that is created excludes strangers for whom there are no strong feelings. Conventional solidarity is based on common interests and concerns the values which unite a group through joint struggles or efforts; if people want to be members of the group, they have to subject themselves to its norms. Reflective solidarity is defined as a mutual expectation of responsible orientation to relationships, which is obtained through communication. Jodi Dean (1995) thinks that we are moving further away from the first two towards the latter, where reflexivity prevails. Dean's concept of reflective solidarity complements Honneth's theory of solidarity (1996), where recognition is seen as the general prerequisite for the development of a socially well-functioning identity and hence for people's possibilities for self-realization and social integration.

In line with Pardo's discussion of self-worth (1996), mutual recognition is the precondition for a successful relation to oneself and it can be expressed, a) as developing a positive relation to oneself through the certainty of the continuity of affective ties; b) as recognizing legally the citizen as an equal member of the community of rights which is a precondition for the development of self-respect; and, c) as recognition of the ethical person who is the bearer of specific qualities. Given that the nature of people's jobs and of their working experiences permeate the abovementioned prerequisites for attaining solidarity and self-respect in modern societies, it seems that the recent pandemic of COVID-19 undermines the prospects of social cohesion and puts in jeopardy its preconditions. In this light, individual responsibility through social distancing has emerged as the main, necessary therapeutic means for coping with pandemic's spread. This kind of biopolitical technology has an intrinsic spatial aspect: the more one is distanced the better for him/her. Space, thus, is medicalised and along with it, all aspects of social life. Thus, reflective solidarity takes the form of an ethical dilemma in Butler's (2015) terms: Am I responsible for what happens in society to the extent that I am far away from it or, due to its closeness, I cannot help assume the responsibility for it? An important dimension of this condition is the symbolic and actual ordering of people's bodies.

The COVID-19 crisis showed vividly that before anything else what is at stake is the protection of human bodies, which are probably on the verge of becoming fragile and vulnerable if social distancing is not followed. In this connection, teleworking emerges as the epiphenomenon of the current health crisis, as it orders bodies in tele-places giving the impression that society keeps working and that a new digital solidarity is forming. Yet, teleworking is another form of social distancing which in the majority of cases creates fear,

stress and vulnerability to the extent that no one can really know whose working career is worth continuing and whose is not. Hence, teleworking as a means of biopower manages the existing inequalities in the labour market through the unequal distribution of vulnerability in society. In other words, who is next for entering this *terra incognita* in terms of legislation, application, survival and working future?

My experience from teleworking in the University is that, depending on the context, this is a highly problematic process. No sociality is developed, teaching gets an instrumental character, there is no essential mentoring, the notion of working time is blurred with that of personal time, time is annihilated by space becoming more relentless and questions arise, such as: what if, in the near future, my job would be done by a talking machine or a Youtube video, instead of an academic teacher? Of course, talking machines cannot do research but who really cares in the age of medicalised social relations? In addition, I was thinking that (so far) my job was, in a way, well protected but what about other workers, who are no longer considered to have privileged employment (bank employees, service workers etc)? The imperative of implementing teleworking because of COVID-19 pandemic into all kinds of jobs in both the public and the private sectors rapidly transforms people's working experiences in various respects. The two defining features of teleworking are: a) remoteness from office, meaning that the home becomes the location of this type of work; and, b) the inclusion of information technologies as crucial to teleworkers performing their work.

While some researchers regard teleworkers as necessarily working from home, others agree that telework can include work in a variety of locations as long as it is remote from the client or the employer (Sullivan 2003). It has been suggested that teleworking is a knowledge-oriented task and that teleworkers are knowledge workers who work with intangibles. As for the impact of teleworking on workers' life, studies that demonstrate positive outcomes from telework, such as improved work-life balance for employees and reduced costs for organizations (Kanellopoulos 2011), are contrasted by other studies demonstrating potentially negative outcomes, such as difficulties in developing shared knowledge among employees and reduced work satisfaction (Pyöriä 2011).

On the one hand, it is argued that teleworking gives people access to a better balance of work and home life; by spending less time away from home, can use spend more time with their family, choose their work hours and manage their own time. Additionally, organizations take advantage of a labour market of skilled personnel who are not necessarily able to work full time from a conventional office environment such as the disabled. Thus, productivity is increased because workers are highly motivated to prove that their teleworking is successful.

On the other hand, relevant research has highlighted many problems related to teleworking. Social isolation is the most frequently cited disadvantage because the opportunity of crafting bonds and comparing with others co-workers for self-improvement is lost. In addition, workers are pushed to work even if they are ill. More generally, they are pushed to be present regardless of the difficulties that they experience, a phenomenon which has been called 'presentism'. Often, the quality of work is negatively impacted because teleworkers are not

offered the necessary technical support. Another issue concerns the undermining of work networks and job culture through which workers obtain information for career advancement or for trade-union participation. Finally, there is a blurring of boundaries between work and home life.

As the importance of the benefits and the disadvantages of teleworking concerns both private and public sectors, the challenge for Greek society is whether telework leads to greater professional isolation and less organizational commitment and how it affects employees' precariousness levels (Spyridakis 2013). A final challenge has to do with the ageing of the workforce population. To the extent that the labour market cannot accommodate elder workers into teleworking, there might well be increased financial pressure on a shrinking share of younger workers to fund the retirement and health care of a growing nonworking older population (Friedberg 2000, Richard and Steuerle 2004). This could also translate into labour and skill shortages for many industries and organizations. Retaining older workers reaching retirement age is to the employers' benefit, for these workers are highly knowledgeable and skilled and embody desirable work-related attributes such as maturity and dependability. The opportunity to telework, especially from home, can offer an added incentive for many older workers to delay retirement or re-enter the workforce. At the same time, employers could tap into this expanded labour pool without having to meet the costs associated with office space and commuting. However, there are a number of considerations that need to be addressed to maximize this opportunity for older people, including the technological demands of telework jobs, the technology skills required and managers' attitudes toward telework and older workers.

To sum up, the challenges posed by the current pandemic concern the way people are going to deal with the transformation of work into teleworking, the way this transformation is going to impact upon workers' social identity and the way in which the sense of self-respect and recognition is going to affect the determinants of social solidarity in Greek society.

For now, the application of teleworking comes from the demand side of the labour market. However, research conducted during the COVID-19 crisis showed that employers are willing to go on with this form of work even after the pandemic, thus changing labour and organization models in the production process. Six out of 10 companies stated that in the post-COVID-19 era and in view of the new model of distance working they will update the performance measurement systems of their employees with special emphasis on Key Performance Indicators. The pandemic also seems to have serious effects on labour organization, which combines with the new skills companies demand from employees, such as the ability to work without supervision (67.16%); the orientation to the results (49.25%); the ability to cooperate (47.7%); the ability to communicate (38.81%); and the ability to deal with information management (28.36%). Finally, these new processes in the labour market have generated a new form of leadership. According to People for Business (2020), the 'leader' of the digital age must have the following characteristics: change management (57.14%); empathy (49.21%); strategic thinking (42.86%); digital skills (39.68%); resilience (36.51%); decision making and crisis management (28.57%) and innovation and creativity (26.98%).

All this happens in a context where the sudden cessation of economic activity has caused an unprecedented recession both internationally and domestically, which must be read in the context of the Greek economy having experienced a ten-year very cruel Memoranda period. The Greek GDP decreased in the fourth quarter of 2019 by 0.7%, compared to the third quarter of the same year. The GDP showed the largest decrease in exports and imports of goods and services (Vatikiotis 2020). Moreover, according to the OECD's rough estimates, the recession in 2020 will approach 10%, while growth will be significantly lower for 2021 (specifically, 2.3%); employment will fall by 3.8% this year and by 1.8% in 2021; unemployment will rise from 19.6% in 2020 to 20.4% in 2021; and the debt will exceed 200% in 2020.

The COVID-19 period is not simply a state of emergency one. In my view, it is a great opportunity for the complete and radical re-organisation of labour and for the re-framing of working rights from the demand side of the labour market. Teleworking is only one aspect of the neoliberal wish for labour costs and wages reduction in the name of the common good at a time when public intervention and labour friendly policies are badly needed. To avoid social disruption and more vulnerability we must understand the needs and the lived experiences of how workers deal with the teleworking reality and the management of their precariousness in general (Pardo 1996). Effective policy measures can be implemented in a way that meet the situational demands. Thus, workers' sense of self-respect will be empowered, and the prospects of social solidarity will be better grounded. In this sense, public intervention is necessary: in the context of this state of emergency, the labour market partners can be better informed and negotiate good labour relations; best practices adopted during the health crisis can be adapted to the needs of vulnerable groups; unemployment and social exclusion can be managed in the long term to the extent that teleworking may create new employment positions; a sizeable portion of nay financial assistance can be directed towards the empowerment of workers who are on the verge of losing their job. The future is near, we will see.

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