UBERAN ANTHROPOLOGY

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Spyridakis’ book *Liminal Worker: An Ethnography of Work, Unemployment and Precariousness in Contemporary Greece* is one of the finest recent research projects conducted on the fall of neoliberal capitalism in the Western civilization using the case of Greece. This anthropological study delves into issues of fundamental social importance, exposing the most crooked sides of the current economic system while studying the social effects of the most recent Greek financial crisis. Against a background of the major economic difficulties in his country, Spyridakis zooms in on the subject matter of his work in its social significance, through the point of view of the most vulnerable members of the current socio-economic order. This is how through his research the author makes an invaluable contribution to the study of employment and unemployment and the precariousness of living in today’s politically and economically complicated and dynamic world.

What Spyridakis offers to his readers are the results of a compelling anthropological research based on the stories of three separate groups of workers, against a background of the most severe crisis gripping the Greek society in its modern history. For the purposes of this research, he uses a qualitative approach. The greatest merit of the methodology chosen in this study is that it amplifies the individual narratives and the experience of a limited sample of people, connected to the research question in a specific way, which is the same for the whole group – in this case work affiliation to a certain company – the binding element among the respondents, in order to illustrate specific outcomes, to which the researcher arrives empirically.

The book is structured into 6 separate chapters. The chapters Introduction and Situating liminality serve to outline the general context of the study and are devoted to familiarizing the reader with the topic of the research. In these two initial parts, Spyridakis explains the importance and focus of the study, the goals and the expected contribution to the field and the body of academic knowledge.

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The third chapter of the book deals with the research conducted among tobacco workers. It focuses on the experience of people who have been forced out of work in order to research the experience of losing a job, the ways the jobless handle the new situation they are forced into, and the external factors which influence the process, namely the role of the political and economic macro-climate.

The findings from Chapter 3 are somewhat disturbing but groundbreaking since they prove wrong a major dominant view, holding that the unemployed should shoulder the burden of being unemployed by themselves grounded in the understanding that they are in this position due to lack of certain qualities or abilities. Chapter 3, on the contrary, illustrates that this theory is a misconception.

Apart from this, Spyridakis studies the relationships between the employer and its employees since the founding of the tobacco factory and provides an overview of the whole process of employment. In doing so, some of the respondents contribute to the study by providing their accounts of the past, of the times before they were employed at the factory and reveal their relation and attachment to it over time. From these accounts, the researcher studies the genesis of the social relations. It becomes obvious that also another theory is not applicable in the case – that the unemployed are sacked because of lack of work ethic or respect and commitment to their employer. The reasons, as Spyridakis proposes, lie far from the employees themselves but are to be sought in the macro environment. Based on his study, in Chapter 3 Spyridakis draws the conclusion that there are certain relationships between specific economic and political processes and decisions which govern the processes on the labour market and are beyond the control of those who are on this market, be they employed or unemployed.

Chapter 4 depicts the author’s research conducted in a shipbuilding company in Piraeus. The aim of this research is to investigate how locals estimate their involvement in the local employment process before they were hired by the company, at the time of their employment and after the end of their contract. This chapter is vital to the overall understanding of the topic since it provides a different perspective of respondents who are traditionally engaged in casual employment and, because of the industrial specifics of the region, are often in and out of work and in between jobs.

In this chapter, Spyridakis analyses the history of the shipbuilding industry and the traditions of shipbuilding in the region in order to estimate the importance of the sector for the region and nationwide. Further in the study, he examines the link between political decisions, economic interests, policy-making and the structure of employment and the experience of those employed in this sector. An interesting point that Spyridakis makes in his research is the role of the Zone as a social place, where interpersonal relations are created. The Zone appears to be the domain where the workers structure and influence their relations, where identities are created and shaped and, most importantly, where information flows.

Chapter 5 of the book is devoted to bank employees. In this part of the research, Spyridakis limits his study to analysing the work identities of people who are employed in a white-collar institution, the qualities of the working conditions and how work harassment in this environment shapes them. This study provides an intriguing opportunity to look into the changes that occur in employment identities in a post-industrial organizational setting. This chapter analyses the power relations in the workforce and the social practices that derive from them. I see as a major limitation for this chapter the sensitivity of the
topic and that – for instance – harassment, misuse of social status or even power-driven conflicts at the workplace cannot be easily documented and are therefore hard to study objectively since the data may not always be valid or complete.

This part of the book makes obvious the real dimension of the issue and the range of those who are concerned. From this chapter, it becomes clear that there is not a single stratum of the Greek society that is left unconcerned by the social effects of the economic processes, which are themselves the result of certain political decision-making. Therefore, it becomes apparent that even the lives of those who are employed lack stability and they are, too, standing on the same moving sands. Although the common understanding is that once they are employed their micro-world should be intact, Spyridakis’ study reveals that on the contrary, in reality they are neither impervious nor impregnable. The unprepared reader may be taken aback by this revelation from this outlook.

On the whole, the book can be read as a pioneer research investigating the immediate effects of the changes on the labour market on the social status, as well as on the identities of ordinary Greek people from three various perspectives. It appears from the study that these Greeks are mere bystanders, who have no say on processes that directly affect their whole condition. They seem to be deprived of their own free choice and instead they are left leading lives that they find grossly dissatisfying. On a daily basis, it seems that the respondents try to make sense of their being on their own. What is more, in the turmoil of the new realities, they happen to be constantly struggling to regain their working identities in one system marked by weakened social security, where stability is missing and there is little left to hold on to. The pressure and the burden that the system has put on the Greeks, as it becomes clear from Spyridakis’ research, are so unbearable that they are practically left without the opportunity to conceive for themselves. Paradoxically, these same people, who are the ones most concerned, are the sole most important creators of the economic and social well-being of their own country.

Whereas the research sheds light on processes that are valid for three specific groups of workers from three specific companies at a specific time and place, the results can be viewed as a metaphor for the processes that take place in Greece at that period. On a macro level, universally, however, this study speaks volumes about the lack of social protection, which can be viewed as the hallmark of current neoliberal capitalism. Whereas the research itself puts issues of crucial importance to the table, it also questions the system and adds to the whole narration of the moral and social collapse of neoliberal capitalism.

Evidently, this recent study substantially contributes to the whole academic body of knowledge on the anthropological aspects of employment in our modern-day society, but also provides a much needed new perspective from the anthropological point of view, exposing new dimensions of the social impact of this phenomenon. With this new social perspective of the topic, Spyridakis opens up a highly important anthropological dialogue, which has previously been by and large under-researched and little examined on the Balkans. Therefore, the greatest contribution of Spyridakis’ study to the field is the new vigour that he adds to the larger discourse on employment and unemployment. On the whole, my strong conviction is that Liminal Worker: An Ethnography of Work, Unemployment and Precariousness in Contemporary Greece makes a highly informative and thought-provoking reading.