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Working on the Street: the Social Dimension of University Graduates Living as Mobile Craftspeople (Dionysiou Areopagitou Street – Apostolou Pavlou Street, Athens)

Abstract:

In recent years, the Greek economic crisis has led to a new phenomenon: an increasing number of unemployed university graduates, who are turning to producing and selling handmade items (e.g. jewellery) on the street. This paper focuses on their presence on the busy pedestrian walkway of Dionysius the Areopagite (Dionysiou Areopagitou Street) and their business setups in the immediate vicinity of the New Acropolis Museum. It is an attempt to shed light on this multifaceted phenomenon, through the study and analysis of issues relating to the new social profile of street craftspeople, their presence in the area, their working conditions, the relationships they develop with the buying public and the financial gains resulting from their work. The work constitutes a first attempt at an interpretive understanding of the phenomenon based on the first-hand experiences of three young university graduates who, subsequent to being fired from their job, chose to adapt their activities by using and developing skills relating to the production of handmade jewellery, much as they had at a younger age. In particular, I shall try to show that the choice of the numerous young craftspeople offering their wares along the pedestrianised Apostolou Pavlou Street is, in parallel, also an attempt at creative expression as a corollary of the economic crisis.

Key words: economic crisis, unemployed university graduates, pedestrian walkway of Dionysius the Areopagite, craftspeople, handmade items, creative expression

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In recent years in Greece, ever since the ongoing economic crisis, a vast workforce of unemployed professionals was created, who turned to “flexible” or “informal” work as casual or seasonal workers. By “flexible” or “informal” forms of employment, we mean those that deviate from the normal work model corresponding to the employment relationship of full-time employment. The main features of these forms are: difficult working conditions, a precarious work status, extremely low income, continual mobility in search of work, and lack of social acceptance, features that are akin to what Tony Watson has defined as “low-status work” (Watson 2005, 207). These forms of employment include the production and sale on the street of handmade items (for example jewellery, knitwear, decorative objects, and so on).

As noted by G. Kouzas in his study on the “foragers” of Athens, in Greece, it is only in recent years that the academic community has become interested in studying the various forms of “informal” work from a multidisciplinary perspective, according to holistic approaches based on ethnographic field research, (Kouzas 2016). On the basis of what he mentions, over the past fifteen years systematic studies have been carried out on the various forms of “undervalued” and “low-status” work by university establishments (Panteion University, University of Ioannina and University of the Aegean) that, for the very first time, record and analyse facets of the work process, such as the reasons motivating social subjects to work, the work system’s subjective assessment, the working persons’ value system and behavioural code, etc. (Kouzas 2016, 53). Characterised by a holistic approach and an interdisciplinary perspective, these studies comprehensively showcase the phenomenon in its entirety, thus contributing to its more profound understanding.² However, they largely focus on “auxiliary or incidental jobs”, such as domestic employment, or on “low status” work, such as that largely carried out by women immigrants (Psimmenos, Skamnakis 2008; Bada, Argyrou 2013; Lazarescu 2015).

The paper records the emergence of new forms of work in the urban space through the presence of craftspeople in the busy pedestrianised street of Dionysiou Areopagitou and their makeshift stalls

² See indicatively Bada 2004; Papataxiarchis – Topali – Athanasopoulou 2009; Psimmenos 2013. Reference to the relevant bibliography is also made by Kouzas (2016, 73), in particular in notes 10, 11 and 12.

set up just before and a little after the New Acropolis Museum.³ An attempt is made to highlight this phenomenon's polysemous nature through multiple readings of the stories of Dimitra, Sofia and Kostas, three street vendors with a university education. Based on their narratives⁴, I explored issues relating to the new social profile of street craftspeople, their presence in this particular space, their working conditions, the techniques and materials for making jewellery, the relationships they develop with the buying public and the financial gains resulting from their work. The research material was based on participatory observation (Tonkin 2003) and semi-structured interviews with producers and vendors of handmade objects during their work time at the Sunday market (March-June 2016). Most of the participants in this survey are unemployed professionals aged 22 to 40, and who use crafts not only for survival "but also as a form of expression that allows them freedom". The survey also turned to the public – the customers – with whom vendors develop relationships within a well-played "performance", as defined by Erving Goffman, based on the interaction of both parties (Goffman 2006, 17).

This paper constitutes a first attempt⁵ at an interpretive understanding based on the first-hand experiences of three young university graduates and their choice, after being dismissed from their workplace, to adapt their activities through the use and development of skills relating to the production of handmade jewellery, which they had already done at a younger age. In particular, an attempt will be made to show that the choice of the young craftspeople who line the pedestrianised street of Apostolou Pavlou offering their wares also constitutes, in parallel, an attempt at creative expression that derives from the ongoing economic crisis.⁶

3 Regarding the Street Folk see indicatively Hoffland 1967, 85-88; Dorson 1981, 144-154; Warshaver 1983, 162-171; Abrahams 2009³.

4 Regarding the biographical approach in contemporary folklore research, cf. Kakamboura 2008.

5 This paper is a presentation of the first results of research work carried out in the context of a joint research project between the Laboratory of Folklore and Social Anthropology of the Department of History and Ethnology, of the Democritus University of Thrace and the Етнографски институт САНУ / Institute of Ethnography SASA on: "Art practices and urban promenades Belgrade's Knez Mihailova Street vs. the Dionysius the Areopagite Promenade in Athens".

6 On the cultural repercussions of the crisis in Greece, see Tziovas 2017.

The open-air market along Apostolou Pavlou Street and its association with the emblematic New Acropolis Museum

In recent years the area around the Acropolis has become the most popular public space in the city. This is due to the pedestrianisation of the Dionysiou Areopagitou and Apostolou Pavlou streets in 2002, completed as part of the unification of the archaeological sites of Athens, and the construction of the Acropolis Museum in 2009⁷ – a museum-landmark, such as those found in the world’s major metropolises (MacLeod 2013). The aim, moreover, of the numerous new museums that are being created at the same time throughout the world, is to showcase an emblematic building capable of attracting tourists and contributing to the upgrading of the relevant city on the international map (Lord and Blankenberg 2015, 5-27). As Marlen Mouliou noted in a recent article (Mouliou 2015, 11), the New Acropolis Museum’s location within the wider area “has already contributed to the sector of cultural and tourist activity, as well as to the commercial development of small businesses that serve the needs resulting from the impressive increase in the number of people strolling in the neighbourhood, both seasonal and locals”.

According to architect and town-planner Dora Galáni (1999, 76), head of the “Pedestrianisation of Dionysiou Areopagitou – Apostolou Pavlou” project, one of the main aims of this particular pedestrianisation was “the monuments’ integration into the living fabric of the contemporary city, creating something more than just a simple walkway, a place of serenity, perambulation and contemplation, while simultaneously signifying a repossession of ancient routes by today’s visitors”.⁸ The pedestrianised street of Dionysiou Areopagi-

⁷ See <https://www.archdaily.com/61898/new-acropolis-museum-bernard-tschumi-architects>. More specifically regarding the criticism of the New Acropolis Museum in terms of its interpretive approach, the exhibition’s layout, etc., see indicatively Plantzos 2009; Plantzos 2010; Plantzos 2011; Gazi 2012, 56-58.

⁸ The implementation of the programme concerning the rehabilitation of Athens’ historic centre through the unification of the city’s archaeological sites and the creation of one of the largest and most important open museums in the world for the benefit of the inhabitants and visitors of the City of Athens was undertaken by “Unification of the Archaeological Sites of Athens S.A.” (EAXA), an institution established in 1997 (Government Gazette 909 B 15.10.1997).

you has now become a classic Athenian Sunday walk, where walkers, starting off at the Temple of Olympian Zeus, enter an open-air museum, where 19th- and 20th-century buildings coexist and “communicate” with outdoor cafés, tavernas, souvenir shops,⁹ and with the Acropolis and Parthenon.¹⁰ This route leads visitors to perceive the geometry of the ground in relief, the scale of the landscape, and the roughness of the materials in relation to the emblematic building of the New Acropolis Museum, through both the gravity of their bodies¹¹ and their gaze.

A short distance after the Museum, Dionysiou Areopagitou Street as such ends, changing name (and direction) and becoming Apostolou Pavlou Street. This is a street that, in the midst of other small-scale vendors, hosts numerous producers and vendors of handmade items: jewellery made of various materials, knitwear, decorative objects crafted using recyclable materials, glass, wire, metal and others. The choice of the specific location for the display of this merchandise is explained on the basis of what the “Athena Ergane” Association of Visual Arts, Artists and Handicrafts states¹²:

According to Dora Galáni (2004), this organisation strived “to create an environment that evolves as a result both of the new and old buildings, the ancient and contemporary sections of the historic centre, an environment through which it is recognised that the city constitutes a continuum that is connected as much to our past as to our future”. See:

<http://webcache.googleusercontent.com/search?q=cache:vis8Y3k-DeN8J:portal.tee.gr/portal/page/portal/teetkm/DRASTHRIOTH-TES/EKDHLVSEIS/EKDHLWSEIS_2004-2006/PANO%2520KATO/Tab5253741/7%2520-%2520%25CD%25D4.%2520%25C3%25C1%25C-B%25C1%25CD%25C7%2520-%2520%25C5%25C1%25D7%25C1%2520.doc+&cd=1&hl=en&ct=clnk&gl=gr

9 Today, the wider area beneath the Acropolis has been transformed into a lively metropolitan public space. However, objections have been raised pointing to the dangers lurking behind the rapid expansion of recreational activities, the frequent hosting of events, etc. for the area’s natural and cultural landscape. See: <http://www.greekarchitects.gr/gr/republic-space/%CE%BA%CE%AC%CF%84%CF%89-%CE%B1%CF%80%CF%8C-%CF%84%CE%B7%CE%BD-%CE%B1%CE%BA%CF%81%CF%8C%CF%80%CE%BF%CE%BB%CE%B7-id2444>

10 Regarding the Parthenon in particular, *cf.* Korres 2000.

11 *Cf.* Careri (2002, 154), who mentions that “the terrain’s physical structure is reflected in the body in motion”:

12 See: <http://www.businessnews.gr/article/72669/heirotehnas-athinas-poios-the-lei-na-toys-dioxei-apo-istoriko-kentro>

“The work of the visual craftsperson is associated with places of tourist interest, as the craftsperson works and bases his/her existence on traditional and contemporary artistic creations that require an urban and tourist exposure. Exclusion from tourist and archaeological areas isolates the craftsperson from the vibrant cultural development of the country, with which folk art and creation are interwoven.”

The human geography of Apostolou Pavlou Street: the social and economic background

The busy Sunday scene along Apostolou Pavlou Street is dominated by the presence of makeshift stalls set up one next to the other and in very close proximity to their neighbours. The scene is completed by the presence of the public standing in front of these stalls, picking up objects and talking with the vendors. From the start of the ethnographic survey, I realised that, within the year since my last visit there, the number of small-scale vendors' stalls had increased very noticeably. “In the beginning there were maybe five people here, then they became ten, and now there must be at least 500 stalls present this weekend. There are also new people who lost their jobs,” says Dimitra, an architect by profession and now a creator and vendor of jewellery. Dimitra studied architecture in England, where she also completed postgraduate studies. She then worked in painting; including icon painting. “I have many degrees and diplomas. When you are young and you are studying, you think the world is yours, that you will conquer it. Then you come down to earth. For me, this work is easy. I did it before, at 17, for pocket money. I'm good with my hands. Now I had to return to it so as to survive.”

Sofia studied Italian literature. As a student she worked giving private Italian lessons and she also taught in a language school. “A year ago, I was fired from the foreign language school. I found myself jobless. Even the few private lessons offered hardly any money. They asked me to give classes at five euros an hour. I couldn't make a living. I have always been good with my hands. I used to make bracelets and earrings for my classmates and myself. My grandmother used to say to me: “Learn a craft and drop it, and if you're hungry pick it up”. There are many of us here who are graduates and found ourselves on the street”.

A once-flourishing family business, which was then hit by the economic crisis, brought 28-year-old Kostas to Apostolou Pavlou Street, where he sells small pieces of silver jewellery, rings, bracelets, necklaces, which he makes himself. Kostas studied at the Department of Fine Arts and Sciences of the Arts of the University of Ioannina. "I learnt the craft of silver- and gold-smithing from when I was a young boy working at my father's side. I grew up in the workshop he had on Kafandari Street. For many years the workshop had regular customers. But the economic crisis hit us too. In 2015, the workshop closed. The sums needed to keep it going were unbearable. Upon graduating from university, I found myself with no job in view. I decided to make pieces of jewellery and sell them in the street".

A constructed social identity

From the beginning of the ethnographic research, at the time when everything can be potentially important and can lend itself to interpretation, while talking with the active subjects of my research, I participated in parallel in conversations that developed among them, but also with their buying public. According to Pigiaki (2004, 83), understanding the qualitative texture of social phenomena presupposes studying the content of the multiple and often different realities of the active subjects involved. For this very reason, I also paid particular attention to recording their feelings as cultural derivatives, in the manner in which these emerged in speech.

In these conversations, the issue of "low status" work that occupied the subjects of my research constituted the main axis around which the conversation evolved. More often than not, this issue fuelled political debates "about the country's abject state, which drives its graduates to emigrate or leads them to work on the street". The reproduction of a stereotype image regarding the situation of unemployed graduates during the crisis often led to charged exchanges of opinion. According to the prevalent value system, their occupation in the production and sale of jewellery on the street is seen as a *deviation* from the existing regulatory norms (Goffman 2001, 209). "Of course", according to Goffman's position (2001, 205), "this diversity stems from society itself, because usually, before a difference ac-

quires great importance, it has to be perceived collectively by society as a whole". In this context of social interaction, the labelling of their occupation as *degrading*, as abnormal "considering their qualifications", imparts a constructed social identity to them and on whose basis sometimes negative and at other times positive comments are made. The dialogue excerpts that follow reflect this:

- "I feel ashamed for all the youngsters who are university graduates and work on the street. In my time, having a university degree was a great thing my young lady. My mother would say "my daughter is a university graduate" and her eyes would shine. Things have changed now. Is it possible that a young professional should be selling bracelets on the street?" (Ioanna, retired teacher, 70 years old)

- "I love what I do, it expresses me; it's creative. I'm not ashamed of my work. I work on the street, but I don't belong to it. I believe that most people who are here love what they do", says Dimitra.

- "We come and buy all our gifts here. The prices are affordable and the items are special, with a great deal of taste and ingenuity. We buy from young people. Most of them are professionals who don't have a job but have to make a living. Whatever they do they do with respect. They don't try to fool you. I know all of them on a first-name basis. And I know their stories, their needs and their dreams. We live in Dáfní¹³ and come here every Sunday." (Yannis and Olga, retired teachers, 78 and 76 respectively)

- "For me, this attitude towards my work is an inspiration for the creation of new handmade pieces of jewellery. Handmade objects endure through the passage of time, passing from hand to hand. They carry my story and the story of the people who buy them. It's because of this that whatever I do; I do with a lot of love and attention. For me it's a form of creative expression. I make a living out of this, but I also breathe through it," says Sofia.

According to Despina Názou¹⁴, "work" constitutes a field of multiple conceptualisations. On the basis of the narratives above, within this field the subjects exercise/are subject to control, dedicate time

13 Dafni is an inner suburb of Athens, 2 km south of the Acropolis, and is on the same metro line as the one serving the Acropolis Museum.

14 <http://www1.aegean.gr/gender-postgraduate/Documents/%CE%9C%CE%B5%CE%BB%CE%AD%CF%84%CE%B7%20%CE%9D%CE%AC%CE%B6%CE%BF%CF%85.pdf>

and energy so as to survive, but also in order to express themselves creatively and, through the production and circulation (Appadurai 1986) of the objects they make, earn respect, self-esteem and pleasure. In the specific historical analysis context, the handmade pieces of jewellery interacting with people with an emphasis on their materiality are involved in the production of social realities and the shaping of behaviours and values.¹⁵

Strategies for promoting handmade jewellery

Following the perspective of a theatrical transposition to the study of *face to face encounters* (Makrinioti 2006, 12) adopted by Goffman (1956), I focus on the techniques devised and applied by the vendors of jewellery so as to ensure that, by controlling the impressions, they achieve their personal goal.

On Sofia's stall, there is a display of jewellery made of pebbles wrapped with wire, of beads threaded on to wire or steel wire or fishing line, of semi-precious stones, but also pieces of jewellery crafted according to the macramé technique. However, at the stall's centre, jewellery made of lace holds sway on a piece of red velvet, with different patterns and colours, decorated with a variety of materials. "I learnt to crochet," she explains, "at seminars I attended at the Museum of Greek Folk Art. I crochet small and large motifs, for earrings, necklaces and chokers. Through YouTube I learnt to make jewellery out of lace. What is very "in" and fashionable are vintage elements and old techniques, such as knitting and crochet. These are the pieces that sell well". Lace motifs, Atlacoll glue, clasps for pendant earrings, small hoops/links, chains, beads, small pairs of flat and serrated pincers and a pair of scissors constitute the basic tools of her trade, which complete the well-staged scene. Sofia's hands are in constant motion with her crochet needle, giving a *performance* all the time she is conversing with her customers. Because of this practice, she draws people to her stall, without needing to use verbal communication points to announce the items for sale to the public.

The public in front of the stalls selling jewellery is mainly composed of women, without that meaning that men, looking for a special gift, are absent. As Kostas points out: "Women are more dif-

15 Miller 1987; Gell 1998; Ingold 2007; Tilley 2007; Dudley 2010.

difficult than men; they have difficulty in making up their minds and deciding. They can spend hours choosing things, putting them to one side, and then leave without buying anything returning on the following Sunday with a woman friend to ask for her opinion". On the customers' side, the purchase of an item is determined by its quality, the price, the relationship of trust in the vendor and the time he/she devotes to them.

A tough work environment, but also a space of freedom of expression and creation

Work on the street offers autonomy, creativity and the joy of direct communication with the world, and Dimitra, Sofia and Kostas seem to enjoy what they do. During the endless hours at the stall – up to 12 hours a day in summertime –, they not only serve passers-by but also renew their merchandise with new creations they produce onsite. "The tough conditions haven't worn me out yet. Of course, those who have been here for many years are very tired, because it's a demanding job", says Kostas.

In any case, harsh and unpredictable weather conditions, the necessary coexistence with the other stallholders, legal issues, fatigue, commotion and insecurity make the street a very tough work environment. It is particularly difficult for people who had always worked in offices or in their own businesses to adapt to it. "In the beginning, people who used to work in shops are what we call 'newbies'. In other words, they turn up and don't know exactly how to deal with the bustle, the chasing that sometimes takes place with the police, but you slowly toughen up." (Kostas). Added to these problems is the recent effort of the Municipality of Athens to remove from the open market anyone who is not in possession of a producer-vendor licence for open-air trade, which is the permit that artists-craftspeople producing folk art, jewellery, and other art works exclusively of their own creation must have:

"The artists and craftspeople engaged in open-air trade don't have the potential to earn a substantial income, which would ensure a decent living; their occupation is a way out of the problem of unemployment that is plaguing our country. The overwhelming majority are unemployed citizens. Eradicating them from the open-air market

would lead them to a desperate situation, because they wouldn't be able to meet even their basic needs," argues their Association.¹⁶

However, contact with people and the cultivation of customer relationships based on mutual trust and respect for the artist-creator in terms of his/her work is the powerful element that makes people like Dimitra, Sofia and Kostas continue to work under such conditions. "I do not earn disparagement or pity. I receive respect and acceptance for what I do" (Kostas). For the moment, Dimitra, Sofia and Kostas see themselves working in this way for a long time yet. Not only because their career prospects in their respective fields are scant in crisis-hit Greece, but also because they have come to love the creativity and the freedom that producing handmade objects offers them.

Instead of an epilogue

Through the research, it became clear that there exists no one single form of work, i.e. paid employment, but rather different forms of work, which are also a source of status and a way of securing an income for those performing them. Through an ethnographic approach, the example of the craftspeople at the Apostolou Pavlou Street market highlighted aspects of young unemployed professionals' engagement in itinerant trade, the motives that push the social subjects to undertake such work, the relationships they develop with their customers, their social and economic backgrounds, and of working conditions on the street. Becoming acquainted with them through participatory observation and interviews gave me the opportunity to also enter into their emotional world, something that brought to light the dual dimension of this particular form of work, whereby the people engaged in it approach it both as a "way out" and a solution to the problem of the current economic climate, but also as a way to express their creativity through art.

16 See: <http://www.businessnews.gr/article/72669/heirotehnes-athinas-poios-thelei-na-toys-dioxei-apo-istoriko-kentro>

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Надја Маха-Бизуми

Рад на улици: друштвена димензија живота мобилних занатлија с факултетском дипломом (Улица Дионисија Арео-пагита и Улица Апостола Павла, у Атини)

Последњих година, грчка економска криза је створила нов феномен: растући број незапослених с факултетском дипломом који се окрећу прављењу и продаји ручно израђених предмета (на пример, накита) на улици. Овај чланак се фокусира на њихово присуство на прометној пешачкој стази Дионисија Ареопагита (Улица Дионисија Ареопагита) и њихова продајна места у непосредној близини Новог музеја Акропоља, настојећи да осветли све аспекте тог феномена, проучавањем и анализом проблема у вези с новим друштвеним профилем уличних занатлија, њиховим присуством у тој области, радним условима, односима које развијају с купцима и финансијском добити проистеклом из њиховог рада. Овај чланак представља први покушај интерпретативног разумевања тог феномена, заснован на личном искуству троје факултетски образованих младих људи, који су, пошто су отпуштени с посла, иако још у раном животном добу, изабрали да се прилагоде, коришћењем и развијањем вештина у вези с ручном израдом накита. Посебно ћу настојати да покажем да је такав избор многих младих занатлија који нуде своју робу, дуж пешачке Улице апостола Павла, покушај креативног изражавања, колико и последица економске кризе.

Кључне речи: економска криза, незапослени с факултетском дипломом, пешачка стаза Дионисија Ареопагита, занатлије, ручно израђени предмети, креативно изражавање