

Manos Spyridakis,
*The Liminal Worker. An Ethnography of Work, Unemployment
and Precariousness in Contemporary Greece,*
Farnham, Ashgate, 2013

The newly appeared book by Dr Manos Spyridakis, *The Liminal Worker*, is about the experience of work, employment, employment insecurity and precariousness, from an anthropological point of view and in a context of high unemployment and crisis in the welfare state of contemporary Greek society. Spyridakis places particular emphasis on how workers conceive of their condition in the workplace, their job deprivation and employment precariousness and on how they attempt to deal with the effects these processes bring upon their daily lives. In this view, *Liminal Worker* points to the fact of a constant condition of liminality as a lived experience of workers in a post-Keynesian and de-industrialised framework, within which they are forcefully detached –in symbolic and pragmatic terms– from their former roles of supposed affluence, as well as from their former secure working trajectories and instead undertake a steady course of de-standardisation, coupled with feelings of ambiguity and bewilderment for their future. For this reason, *Liminal Worker* attempts to bring to the fore the way workers conceive of this situation through their ethnographic voices and testimonies against the antisocial background of current economic recession and crisis, as well as to contribute to the anthropologically informed analysis and discussion about work and employment in the European context. According to the writer, within a neo-liberally oriented environment favouring adverse social incorporation, deregulated labour relations and massive layoffs, contemporary workers experience the gradual disappearance of standard employment and the advent of its casual and insecure forms as well as the emergence of vulnerable social relationships, threatening not just their material survival but also their identity and whole life.

Liminal Worker is based on three ethnographic case studies: The first discusses the way tobacco workers experience their unemployment status after the shutdown of a prosperous and historically important tobacco industry in the centre of Piraeus. The second concerns day labourers in the shipbuilding zone located in Perama, a suburb of western Piraeus, addressing the way they try to cope with employment precariousness and extended periods of unemployment in the context of local informal activities. The third discusses employment insecurity and unpredictable working conditions in a leading bank of Athens, where employees, threatened by harassment from an organisational power structure, strive to maintain and secure their employment posts. All three cases point to the fact that contemporary workers experience a liminal working condition, either in or out of work, reminding us emphatically that, in the so called post-industrial period of employment tertiarisation, the relations of exploitation and of inequality during and after the labour process have not essentially changed, and that the Marxian notion of real subordination of workers to capital is still an inexorable reality. Yet, in anthropological terms, all three ethnographic cases keep on reminding us that workers are not passively adapted in the asymmetrical conditions created by the capitalistic accumulation process, but using their past know-how, their imaginative skillfulness and empirically informed flexibility, they struggle

to deal with uncomfortable processes and show a strong commitment to the work ethic, not only as a means for survival but as a source for personal identity and self worthiness.

Inspired by the recurrent Marxian antithesis between labour and capital, *Liminal Worker*, through the narratives of ethnographic voices, empirically questions the views of neoclassical economic theory, according to which society is the sum of individuals and of their rationally defined maximised choices in the form of businessmen, consumers and workers. Contrary to this still empirically unproved conception, the ethnographic data of this book demonstrate that workers very seldom act in this way, for their decisions are embedded in particular socio-political power structures. In addition, they look upon the notion of work not in instrumentally oriented maximising terms but as an activity ascribing identity and status mediated by specific social relations developed through their lifetime experience in the workplace.

Liminal Worker's ethnographic cases show that workers rely heavily on social and cultural aspects of work, which although not always measurable in economic terms, contribute decisively to the management of their existence. Seen from this angle, *Liminal Worker* touches upon the way agents' working courses affect the experience of their present status of uncertainty, as they gradually lose a way of life characterised by relative material stability and passing into a realm of employment uncertainty, of lower living standards, of risky working conditions and of insecure casual jobs. This takes place in the Greek version of post-Keynesian social policy framework, where social protection is under constant fire, state spending as a toolkit for job creation is severely limited, full time employment is substituted by low paid and dead-end jobs, informal labour relations tend to thrive and activation rhetoric prevails, obscuring the absolute freedom of employers to hire and fire at will, against the background of a permanent and still ongoing economic recession. At this point I must say that the analysis would be benefited in case the writer has looked at social policy discourse in a deeper level. Social policy, however, it is not his main detailed emphasis; rather it is an analytic account of the structural preconditions of agents' actions.

Spyridakis, by using the notion of liminality, a valuable concept used originally by Victor Turner, creates an excellent corrective argument against narrow economism in anthropological terms showing that the current insecure and precarious employment is not a coincidental phenomenon but endemic in the mechanism of capitalistic profit making and that despite postmodern glamorousness and rhetoric about New Economy's dynamics and work democratization the often forgotten and disguised feature of capitalist labour market is the ever present effort towards workers' subjection to the disciplinary tenets of market regulation. In short, Spyridakis' well informed ethnography presents a valuable anthropological critique of mainstream economic studies with their emphasis on "rationality" and "free choice".

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