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‘Exceptional’, ‘normal’ or a ‘myth’? The discursive construction of the ‘crisis’ by Greek employees

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Abstract

This article aims to explore the construction of the concept of the ‘crisis’ by Greek employees, when they talk about paid work. In order to do so, 22 interviews with employees aged 23–43 were analysed, deploying the analytic tool of ‘positioning’, informed by poststructuralist assumptions about discourse and the subject. This perspective seeks to illuminate how the hegemonic discourses both on the ‘crisis’ and waged labour persist and are being legitimated through peoples’ mundane practices and speech, aspiring to trace alternative narratives that challenge them. According to our analysis, the ‘crisis’ was discursively formulated in three different, and at a first glance even contradictory, ways: as a ‘state of exception’, as a ‘normal condition’ and as a ‘myth’, serving each time a different function regarding the constitution of the self and the social.

Keywords

Crisis, critical discourse analysis, Greece, positioning, work

Introduction

This article focuses on the ways in which the ‘crisis’ is constructed by Greek employees, the discourses upon which each of their constructions draws, as well as their function on a micro- and macrosocial level. In this way, it intends to illuminate the subject positions

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adopted by individuals in colloquial speech, what they take for granted concerning the self and the social and which discourses have managed to establish their definitions of the working relationship and the 'crisis' as self-evident.

There is abundant literature on how the 'crisis' was formulated in official discourses and in mainstream media (e.g. Lampropoulou, 2014; Pleios, 2013). There is, however, a dearth in research regarding its construction in everyday talk and in mundane discursive strategies. The current study is intended to take a step towards filling that gap, by exploring how Greek employees fashion the 'crisis' in the context of their talk about paid work. Since its impact on the labour market is considered to have been severe, it is interesting to investigate how people mobilize the term in their discourses on work.

Focusing on views 'from below', apart from giving voice to those who are frequently excluded from public dialogue, our intention was to avoid contributing to the consolidation of the neoliberal discourse as a homogeneous and reified ideology, but rather to deconstruct it and demonstrate that it is shaped and perpetuated through quotidian practices. At the same time, we find it rather intriguing to examine explanations that are used 'in practice' and not 'in theory' (Potter and Litton, 1985), given that, whereas the latter may imply higher levels of abstraction and the mobilization of generalities, the former are orientated to particular actions, such as self- and other-positioning or blaming.

Starting by critically reviewing the construction of the latest socioeconomic developments as a 'crisis' by official discourses, we move on to examine its contribution to the production of docile and productive subjectivities. We argue that what was – and still is – described as a 'state of exception' has turned into a normal form of government and has served for the completion of the neoliberal turn, already initiated in the 1980s. Subsequently, we introduce the reader to our empirical research, elaborating on our methodological approach, presenting our sample and the techniques used. In the sections that follow we discuss our findings, providing participants' quotes indicative of the patterns detected in our research corpus and analysing them against the backdrop of the contemporary discursive milieu. The article closes with some reflections on the kinds of discourses that are preferred by individuals when they try to interpret social phenomena such as paid labour or the 'crisis', as well as the impact of such discursive practices on the social universe.

The fabrication of a 'crisis'

The hegemonic public discourses, mainstream media, as well as many intellectuals and academics, have defined the current socioeconomic situation in Greece as a 'Greek crisis', rooted in cultural particularities (see, among others, Mylonas and Kompatsiaris, 2013). The country's economic meltdown has been attributed to inherent characteristics of the Greek political culture such as clientelism and state profligacy, calling into question state interventions – however, not all of them, but mostly the ones related to wealth redistribution, preserving those that consolidate the rule of the market. Accounts that are supposed to shed light on the current socioeconomic situation usually consist of a timeline of facts, with a more or less technocratic orientation (Stavrakakis, 2014). Hence, rather than explain, they contribute to the constitution and the consolidation of their object of analysis, the so-called 'crisis'.

This article does not provide such an account. We argue that crises are social phenomena with no intrinsic meaning; they are constituted as such through discourse. The way a situation is defined and problematized dictates the possible solutions and maintains certain presumptions about the social agents. Hay (1996, cited in Angouri and Wodak, 2014: 544) defines 'crises' as constructions of failure. For Greece, it seems that the unequivocal sign of failure has been the accumulation of debt; the Greek people have been accused of 'living beyond their means', each one individually responsible for the country's 'tragedy', being cast as 'indebted subjects' filled with guilt and shame (Lazzarato, 2012).

Thus, indebtedness was deployed in order to declare the country in a 'state of exception', permitting the suspension of the rule of law by evoking an anomaly, just like in many other places on the planet (Klein, 2007). However, measures that were presented as exceptional and temporary soon turned into the cornerstones of normal governmental practice (Kioupkiolis, 2013). Agamben (2007), drawing on Schmitt, shows that with the voluntary creation of a state of exception, exception can be transformed into the rule; generating the legal space to extort social acceptance for the implementation of the harshest neoliberal doctrines, the suspension or abrogation of the law becomes a normalized practice. Žižek (2010) observes that this kind of government has lost its exceptional character to become a normalcy; what is represented as a 'crisis' is strategically engineered by political and financial institutions that aim at 'resolving' it to their best interest. Following Foucault and Agamben, Athanasiou (2012) claims that the state of exception constitutes the norm for the neoliberal strategy, demanding flexibility and a sort of social Darwinism, in order to meet the needs of late capitalism.

As for the Greek case in specific, several jurists (e.g. Dimitropoulos, cited in Triantis, 2013) call attention to the instrumentalization of the constitution and the marginalization of parliamentary procedures in order to legislate in compliance with the markets' mandates. Hence, apart from unilaterally inflicting their will, governments prioritize the attainment of economic goals over respect of the legal order. This kind of administration that so overtly places the rule of global finance over the democratic order on the pretext of attending an extraordinary situation presupposes and consequently breeds citizens who would trade established rights for, supposedly, enhanced competitiveness and productivity. Dissolving any aspect of liberal democracy that could challenge limitless exploitation of human or natural resources (Mylonas, 2014), neoliberal governmentality engenders self-regulated subjectivities revolving around entrepreneurialism, through discursive practices and institutional remodelling (Foucault, 1991, 2012).

Mainstream media have not added to a deconstruction effort, far from it. Both the international and national press have contributed to the 'pathologization' of Greece, legitimizing exceptional policies, portraying it as a 'patient', a disobedient child or the 'corrupt other', exclusively responsible for its condition due to the ineptitudes immanent to its national identity (Morales et al., 2014; Mylonas, 2014; Pleios, 2013; Tracy, 2012). They actually have fomented the reification of the 'crisis', resorting to a narrow spatio-temporal demarcation that delimits the analytical scope. The reproduction of national statistical indexes of a certain period itself has granted the latter the status of an entirely distinct and unique situation, rather than merely describing it as such. At the same time, matters have been formulated in technical market terms, thus rendering market rather than political solutions more suitable (Douzinas, 2010; Nikolopoulou et al., 2013). As

Morales et al. (2014) stress, articulated through sophisticated tools and procedures unfamiliar to the broad public, neoliberalism builds its naturalization, scaring off people and impeding social debates that could generate alternatives.

Furthermore, factors such as the financial aid that was given to the private banking institutions, that is, the socialization of the losses they suffered due to their private management choices, were never conceptualized as a cause of the 'debt crisis', although the country had to borrow money for their recapitalization; instead, they were represented as necessary and natural moves, directed at saving the country itself. In the same line, the effects of the recession, such as unemployment and the radical drop of living standards, that started to unfold with the implementation of the austerity programme were hardly ever attributed to it; they were rather subsumed under the general term 'crisis', painting an even gloomier picture, rendering the need for technocratic intervention all the more urgent.

Nevertheless, it is not too hard to find the cracks in the hegemonic discourses. European and international institutions have, at several times during the unfolding of the 'Greek crisis', questioned the suitability and efficiency of the austerity measures they themselves dictated and had imposed on Greece (e.g. International Monetary Fund (IMF), 2013), as well as the legitimacy of the so-called 'Troika' (The tripartite committee, formed by the European Commission (EC), the European Central Bank (ECB) and the International Monetary Fund) (Juncker, 2015). At the same time though, they have kept demanding the continuation of the same strategy, eloquently proving that the amelioration of the financial indexes of the country has never been the real motive of their implication. As Margaret Thatcher (Butt, 1981) once said, 'Economics are the method; the object is to change the heart and soul'. Although the previous Greek government discursively constructed a 'success story' in an effort to provide a new meta-narrative of having effectively tackled the 'crisis' (Angouri and Wodak, 2014), at the same time, in 2014, youth unemployment exceeded 50% (Organization for Economic and Co-operative Development (OECD), 2015), 3.9 million of Greeks were living at risk of poverty (Hellenic Statistical Authority, 2015b) and suicides had increased by 35.7% since June 2011, with a direct link between them and the austerity programme (Branas et al., 2015).

Therefore, we maintain that the 'Greek crisis' is not an exceptional moment but an enduring possibility intrinsic to the project of capitalism, activated in order for it to move to a next level – this time, in order to complete the neoliberal turn that started to develop in the 1980s and became more intense during the 1990s (see Kouzis, 2012). Mitropoulos, among others, in 1993 had already called attention to the aftermath of the neoliberal twist in Greece which translated into the deregulation of the labour market and the dismantling of the welfare state. In the name of 'rationalization' and the convergence with the 'occidental' prototype, as opposed to the 'oriental' mentality of laziness, the public sector was demonized and targeted as the root of all bad: the welfare and employment legislation underwent a number of 'parameterizing' interventions, with flexibility constituting their backbone, institutionalizing and encouraging precarious employment, in the pursuit of efficiency and competitiveness. In this way, a certain model of citizenry has been promoted, on the basis of the equation of individual economic productivity to social value (MacLeavy, 2008). However, the implementation of the market-inspired public policies did not signify the demise of the hitherto political culture; instead of eliminating the extrainstitutional forms of social cohesion such as clientelism and vested interests, as they were supposed to, they have coexisted with them all along.

Methodology

Our ontological starting point is that social reality does not have an objective meaning, but meaning is rather assigned to it through social antagonisms. The various descriptions of the social world are never neutral, and although they try to obscure their constitutive contingency, each one of them is merely one of the various possibilities that the cultural and historical setting affords. Bearing that in mind, discourse analysis, treating discourse as a reality in its own right, was deemed most appropriate for our research purposes. More specifically, placing our focus on dominance and inequality, we adopt a critical stance, seeking to bring to light the ways in which social unjustness is being reproduced and resisted through talk (Van Dijk, 1993, 2001).

In this framework we deploy the analytic tool of 'positioning' (Davies and Harré, 1990; Wetherell, 1998) in order to explore the participants' interactional identity concerns, as well as the socio-historical matrix within which those interactions are imbued with meaning. As Davies and Harré (1990) put it,

> Once having taken up a particular position as one's own, a person inevitably sees the world from the vantage point of that position and in terms of the particular images, metaphors, story lines and concepts which are made relevant within the particular discursive practice in which they are positioned. (p. 46)

The concept of 'positioning' is informed here by poststructuralist assumptions about the subject, the undecidable and contingent nature of its 'identity': social agents are subjectified by discourses that provide certain subject positions; these, in turn, prescribe what can be said and done, as well as 'how things should be acted upon, thought, and felt about' (Fougère and Skålén, 2012: 16).

The analysis of such 'self-formative' practices allows us to investigate the active positioning of the subject within culturally available discourses, the attribution of rights and obligations to the self and others, as well as the broader conditions of intelligibility that make possible such positioning. The process of positioning oneself and the others forms part of the antagonistic construction of the social since people place themselves within different discourses and rhetorically negotiate the social identities they claim for themselves and others in order to establish them in the context of each encounter. In this sense, the social agent is

> constituted by an ensemble of 'subject positions' that can never be totally fixed [. . .]. The 'identity' of such a multiple and contradictory subject is therefore always contingent and precarious, temporarily fixed at the intersection of those subject positions and dependent on specific forms of identification. (Mouffe, 1992: 372)

The research

The participants. In total, 22 people, 11 women and 11 men, aged 23–43 were interviewed for the needs of this study between January and February 2015. They all have higher education and were in a paid-work relationship at the time of the research, most of them in small–medium companies in the private tertiary sector. In Greece, 72% of

employees work in the private tertiary sector (Hellenic Statistical Authority, 2015a). Moreover, the Hellenic Statistical Authority (2013) documents that those who were more severely struck by the consequences of the recession in terms of employment were the ones belonging to the age group 25–44, giving room for the hypothesis that they experience a harsher disruption of narrative.

However, the statistical data served only as the backdrop of the selection procedure, which did not intend to 'cover' the entire category 'Greek employee'; instead of aiming for a representative sample that would stand for the sociological category of the 'employed', we focused on the worker as a 'political process, not as sociological identity' (Read, 2007: 125). Recognizing in paid labour a form of subjectification, we attempted to unveil the discursive matrixes that configure the working subjects and the ways in which the latter position themselves inside them when negotiating the meanings of what is canonically referred to as the 'crisis'.

Qualitative interviewing. It is not deemed necessary to dedicate much space to discussing qualitative interviewing; it is one of the most common instruments for data collection within social psychology and the social sciences in general. We find Rubin and Rubin's (1995) metaphor for qualitative interview study extremely eloquent:

> Metaphorically, designing a qualitative interview study is like planning a vacation. You have an overall idea of what you want to see and do, but you are not locked into a fixed itinerary. You allow sufficient flexibility to explore what you see along the way. [. . .] You change plans as new adventures entice you, but you keep the final destination in mind. (p. 42)

Aspiring to explore how Greek employees construct the meaning of the 'crisis' in relation to paid work, we considered semi-structured interviews to be the ideal means. This setting is not meant to reveal a reality that is hidden behind or manifested through language; it is used to trace the different voices that cross participants' texts, aiming to identify the socially embedded subjective positions that are adopted at every point of the interaction, their local function, as well as their macrosocial origin and implications. In this sense we concur with Tanggaard (2009), who argues that 'interviewing provides a context for revealing how language "makes" people, produces and changes social life' (p. 1499).

The central subject of the interviews was the paid labour relationship, and the 'crisis' theme was brought up most of the times by the participants themselves. When they did not refer to it, the interviewer would pose a prompting question such as 'Has the current socioeconomic condition affected the way you feel about work?' and then further explore the issues the participants would raise. The interviews were held in Greek and translated by the interviewer for diffusion purposes. The names that appear here are pseudonyms.

Analysis. The analysis we intended to undertake is of an integrative sort, seeking to examine the relation between broader questions of social practice and power, with local communicative practices. As we have already clarified, we conceive of identification as a complex act of sense-making: 'a matter of transforming cultural resources into performances' (Wetherell, 2008: 74). The variation of ways in which participants positioned

themselves and other social agents when talking allowed us to recognize recurring patterns that are flexibly used in speech and that legitimize or problematize certain views of the social. Following their rhetorical manoeuvers and the creative organization of discursive resources in the processes of negotiating different accounts of the world and attributions of responsibility, we tried to understand how they reproduce or contest the chains of signification that compete over the hegemonization of the meaning of work and the 'crisis'.

After reading and rereading the transcriptions, we moved on to a first registration of the persisting themes. On a second level, we categorized those themes according to the rhetoric goals that the participants intended to accomplish. This implied a focus on the linguistic dimension and exploration of features such as grammar, transitivity, lexical style, syntaxis, coherence, topics and rhetorical figures (Fairclough, 1992; Van Dijk, 1993). At the same time, we took a closer look at the systems of knowledge and belief that were drawn upon (Fairclough, 1992), examining the relation between the positions chosen by the participants and those offered by hegemonic or counter-hegemonic discourses. The analytic procedure was an iterative one, and we remained alert for accounts and formulations that did not match what emerged as predominant pattern(s).

Being unable to attend to all dimensions of the discursive structures in detail due to space limitations, we focus here on the most relevant ones and on the ways they 'confirm, legitimate, reproduce, or challenge relations of power and dominance in society' (Van Dijk, 2001: 353).

Discussion

It was no surprise that the concept of 'crisis' came up very often during the interviews. What is of particular interest, however, is the fact that the 'crisis' was discursively constructed in three different, and at first glance even contradictory, ways, as individuals aimed at different rhetorical goals. What we explore in this section is what is accomplished by each construction on a micro- and a macro-level as well as the discursive resources that inform them. The three ways in which the 'crisis' was conceptualized could be described as (a) a 'state of exception', (b) a 'normal condition' and (c) a 'myth', serving each time a different function regarding the constitution of the self and the social.

The 'crisis' as a 'state of exception'

The 'crisis' was constructed as a 'state of exception' through its rhetorical opposition to a previous, 'normal' social condition. In this way, it was constituted as a discontinuity, an exceptional socioeconomic platform:

1. Interviewer: *How does this make you feel, that you have to work in order to live?*
Demosthenes: *Under normal conditions I would say totally logical. But not now, in Greece.*
– Aha, under normal conditions. Which conditions would be normal?
– First of all I wouldn't work twelve and ten hours a day, I wouldn't work on weekends, I wouldn't work on holidays and the remuneration should be a bit higher. Under normal conditions there are more opportunities for more things.

2. Yannis: *The way that work is right now, I think it's a bit . . .*
Interviewer: *The way it is right now . . . what do you mean?*
– The conditions . . . ok, here we are living in a crisis, so to speak [. . .] work now means [you should] find some food so that you can live and maintain a house etc. Now, so to say, you live to work. You don't work to live, or to live a bit better. Or in order to produce something, so that you don't sit around.

3. Interviewer: *Earlier you mentioned the crisis. Has the crisis affected the way you feel about your job?*
Maria: *[. . .] When you see what is happening around you, on the one hand you say 'thank God, I've got a job and I'm very lucky', but on the other, you can't help feeling somehow unjustly treated, given that at a highly productive age the crisis has impeded your professional development regarding the economic aspect.*

Understanding the current condition as an exception, the rising unemployment rate, the growing sense of precarity, the salary cuts and the long working hours are attributed to a 'unique' set of factors, extrinsic to the capital–labour relation. In turn, the engineering of an 'anomaly' is underpinned by and further stabilizes the institutionalized working conditions as an undisputed normalcy since the construction of an exception is unavoidably coupled by the establishment of the rule.

In the first extract, Demosthenes draws this line very clearly: the labour market is a setting where, under 'normal' conditions, individuals are free to make their choices in a world of opportunities. The use of the first person singular individualizes the navigation in it, ascribing to the self a certain independence from the social conditions. At the same time, the participant claims for himself the status of a hard-working individual, deploying the construction of a list in order to build a positive and reliable persona and achieve facticity (Jefferson, 1990) for his concluding remark: '*Under normal conditions there are more opportunities for more things*'. The topic is not really about working hours or remuneration; it is about opportunity. The discourse around 'opportunity' is paramount for the neoliberal dogma, connected to the assumption of agency that underlies the entrepreneurial self (Gill and Ganesh, 2007). Demosthenes configures 'normality' in a negative formulation, describing what it is *not*; the chain of unfavourable characteristics is implicitly attributed to the present 'exception', leaving the capital–labour relation per se and the inequalities produced and sustained by its very nature beyond reproach.

In the second extract, Yannis mentions directly the 'crisis' and describes the working experience within its framework, contrasting it to the way it 'should be': you normatively 'work to live'. Once again, the extreme circumvention of working time and wage regulations experienced 'now' are fashioned as an 'exception', banalizing the inherently unjust nature of labour, sedimenting it as the 'rule'. Billig (1995) introduced the concept of 'banality' in order to explain how nationalistic ideas have turned into common sense. Similarly, we can see how the inequality that configures the productive relations is not identified as a problem; it is regarded as a facet of everyday life that goes without saying. Discourses on the extraordinary character of the present situation reinforce this process, restricting the unjustness to the particular conditions. As Weeks (2011), quoting John Stuart Mill, argues, we confine ourselves to attending specific problems instead of

focusing on work as a way of life, like the serfs who 'did not at first complain of the power of their lords, but only of their tyranny' (p. 3).

In the third extract, we see how framing the 'crisis' as an obstacle to personal development serves as a discursive device that supports the positioning of the participants as 'effortful' subjects (Gibson, 2009), who aim at economic and hierarchical ascendance. On a syntactical level, the 'crisis' is given a subject position, being presented as an agent that actively affects individuals, who, in turn, have to multiply their efforts. This finding concurs with previous research (Kesisoglou, 2014), according to which young people tend to claim an 'occidentalistic' self that works hard in order to achieve 'something better', despite the adverse conditions. In the same line, Yannis, in the second extract, is implicitly disclaiming being lazy, after having complained about the working conditions, saying that it is acceptable to work ('to produce something') for its own sake ('so that you don't sit around'). This is an important coherence element since it presupposes an unfavourable stance towards 'not working', which is being presented as normatively negative, without needing to further elaborate. The second person singular used by both participants signifies that such thinking is considered self-evident, a general truth and not just a questionable personal opinion.

The 'crisis' as a 'normal condition'

In other instances, the 'crisis' was discursively built as a 'commonsensical condition', itself constituting normality; it was described as the objective reality within which one should unfold her or his activity:

1. Interviewer: *Have the economic conditions of the last few years influenced the way you view your job?*
Artemis: *Yes. Yes. First of all I don't have so many expectations. Before, I was looking for something very specific [. . .]. After the crisis, entering this procedure, I broadened my horizons a whole lot. As for the job content. As for the economic part, I demand nothing from work. I mean, if an employer tells you 'that's it, take it or leave it'. I mean that's the way it is.*

2. Interviewer: *Is it important to you to be well paid?*
Natalia: *No, at this point I wouldn't say that it is important for me to be well paid. It is important for me to get paid, because I've worked without being paid at all! No, now I see it as the most natural [thing], it is like that and it is not going to change. I'm not saying that I wouldn't like that, but I'm not going to pursue it, or feel dissatisfied.*

3. Irini: *I started off with seven fifty net. After the collective agreement, when this thing with the crisis happened, they made us sign individual employment contracts and it was reduced to five ninety [. . .] I realized that if I did a better management, I could do more things, French classes, or yoga classes . . . sure there is pressure, but that's it, it probably needs management.*

In the first extract, Artemis mobilizes the schema 'the crisis as a normal condition', adopting the position of a rational subject who defines her life according to the reality as posed by the market. The reflection of the socioeconomic context on the self and the personal preferences is portrayed as an individual choice, as the use of active voice and

the particular phrase 'I broadened my horizons', with rather positive connotations, imply. By active voicing (Wooffitt, 1992) the ultimatum of the employer, who we could assume functions as a metonymy for the labour market, she constructs an undeniable working reality, which, using the second person singular, is depicted as a reality shared by everyone.

Nonetheless, the market does not only conduct decision making; the emotional states also seem to be tuned to its 'dispositions'. Natalia's words point to a 'despotism of the self' (Rose, 1999): a possible feeling of dissatisfaction is being avoided, thanks to a rational evaluation of the context, one that dictates self-control and compromise. Eloquently confirming the success of the neoliberal governmentality, subjects seem to assume the responsibility of self-regulation enacting 'government at a distance' through introspection and 'realistic' calculation. At the same time, in this extract we detect what Gorz (1999) recognizes as the contemporary work ethic, which extols the centrality of work and can be condensed in the phrase: 'Never mind what you're paid, so long as you have a job' (p. 56). But, as Weeks (2011) stresses, the ethic does not consist only of advice on how to behave; it prescribes formulas of being, that involve 'the incitement of desires, and the adjustment of hopes, all to guarantee a subject's adequacy to the lifetime demands of work' (p. 54).

Hence, the 'crisis' is configured as a 'thing', it is reified and calls for 'management' or 'handling'. This is what Irini argues, when she explains how she gets by after having her salary reduced. The solutions favoured within this formulation are individualistic; they are connected to the personal choices and the individual abilities, strength and resilience. The blame for the difficulties encountered is thus ascribed to the employee who does not 'grasp' how things 'are' and should be 'handled'. The word 'realize' ('συνειδητοποιώ' in Greek) implies a reality that has always been there, waiting for the subject to reach it, while the word 'management' ('διαχείριση' in Greek) also indicates an unchangeable condition, that can only be administered rather that contested or subverted.

The 'crisis' as a 'myth'

Finally, a third way of discursively construing the 'crisis' was as a cover for certain practices. This pattern took two forms, drawing on two different discourses: an individualistic-neoliberal and a class-anticapitalistic one, if we could define them in a way.

Individualistic-neoliberal discourse. In this case, the very existence of the 'crisis' and the phenomena that were normatively attributed to it, such as unemployment or precarity, were questioned, in the framework of a construction of the subject as exclusively responsible for her or his situation:

> 1. Thanos: [. . .] *there is a lot of unemployment, but I'm among those who believe that if you want to find something, even something that is not that good, until you find something better, you can find it.*
>
> 2. Demosthenes: *Things are tougher, but I found a job in the middle of the crisis, so . . .*
> Interviewer: *So what? Do you feel that those who complain do not search correctly?*

> Demosthenes: *It is widely acknowledged that, ok, the last generations of Greeks were used to having things the easy way, objectively. Just because the previous generations had harder times, maybe they saw into making things too easy for them, in many aspects.*

Thanos claims neutrality for his position, admitting that there is unemployment, alleging the validity for his suggestion that 'if you want to find a job, you can'. Once again, what is in question is not just one's conduct but one's very desires, while responsibility for this social condition is ascribed to the individual: it is not the system to blame; it is the people who do not want to find a job. Demosthenes uses the same disclaiming technique by acknowledging that 'things are tougher'; however, his personal experience seems to belie this general notion and is used as a fund of expertise and authority on the matter. Subsequently, he intends to enhance the facticity of his account by invoking 'wide' consensus and 'objectivity' (Edwards and Potter, 1992), rhetorically endorsing it with an extreme case formulation ('too easy', 'many aspects') (Pomerantz, 1986).

Using Said's (1995) terminology, we can say that this conceptualization was further supported by an orientalistic construction of the Greek youth and the Greek society in general, a construction that was frequently deployed by the participants, aiming to be positioned as rational, effortful subjects. Grasping this 'colonial' gaze of the 'West', through which many interviewees viewed the Greek national identity, allows us to reflect on how the 'colonial experience' is

> constitutively engaged in the formation of governable subjectivities: what Foucault referred to as the kind of racism that a society practices against itself in the name of securing itself against internal dangers, and which will inscribe a whole series of micro-racisms within the government of the population of all 'liberal' societies. (Rose, 1999: 47)

The narratives on the 'undeserving poor' are thus underpinned and sustained, reinforcing the neoliberal assumptions about the welfare state. In a way, we can identify an analogy to the 'we are reaping what we sowed' motif, identified in previous research (Stanley, 2014), which legitimizes austerity measures and renders the neoliberal recipe inevitable.

Class-anticapitalistic discourse. At the other extreme, the concept of the 'crisis' was challenged, but from a different perspective. The phenomena that were most frequently blamed on it were not questioned; they were dissociated from it. Thus, it was construed as a strategic move of class nature, a 'myth' in the system's service:

> 1. Xenophon: *The conditions were always hard, it is not during the past four years that the conditions became hard, ten years now that I've been working the conditions in Greece have been hard for the employees. Eh, the conditions of free economy within which we function have never been in favour of us!*

> 2. Maria: *It is exactly because we are forced to, because I think that the modern way of life, and don't make me speak as a SYRIZA follower that I am, but it is capitalism that has brought us to this situation regarding work, [. . .] because otherwise we could come up with a thousand different ways to fulfil ourselves and have fun and mature etc.*

Xenophon also resorts to personal experience in order to lend credibility to his argument, according to which the adverse position in which the employees find themselves today is not a by-product of an extraordinary or temporary condition; it is a systemic symptom of the market operation. The use of the first person plural manifests his identification with a collective, the one of the 'employees' in this case. In this framework, 'Greece' does not stand for an 'oriental' country with an ill political culture, at least not principally; instead, a new chain of equivalence (Laclau, 1997; Laclau and Mouffe, 1985) is produced, prioritizing the country's alignment to the 'free economy' paradigm, establishing a pronounced dichotomy between labour and capital.

When the participants were self-interpellated as subjects determined by class, the 'crisis' seemed to lose its status as a state of emergency and to be incorporated within the capitalist model as its integrative part. Within this discursive construction, the unequal and exploitative relation of paid employment is posited as a social stake, one which can be subjected to collectively formed and socially targeted solutions. Adopting a position of a politicized subject, Maria recognizes that 'talking as a SYRIZA[1] follower' may cost her impartiality; however, it is from this standing point that alternatives can be seen and the articulation of an 'otherwise' is made possible; the relations of production are freed from their commonsensical guise and are linked to a social construction such as capitalism. The use of the first person plural is once again indicative of the prioritization of the social within this discursive motif.

Concluding remarks

There are many domains that this study could not examine in detail and which constitute promising terrains for future research: the relationship between productivity and social value as constructed in quotidian discourse, the reproduction of 'indebted subjectivities' through everyday communication practices and the discursive configuration of the 'crisis' by the unemployed are definitely among them. However, the contribution of this article lies in unveiling the ways in which dominant narratives are being reproduced and contested through mundane communication practices, intending to disarm their naturalized hegemony. At the same time, it demonstrates their crucial part in the normalization of structures that are based on power inequalities, such as waged labour.

Fraser (1990) defines 'hegemony' (p. 85) as the power to establish normative definitions of all aspects of the social and to delimit the space of legitimate disagreement. In contemporary Greece, among other settings, hegemonic discourses transform 'working power' to 'human capital', with the employees being considered as self-reliant business agents. This strategic individualization and depoliticization of work contributes to the understanding of the self as a merely economic actor, enshrining a social model that apes the market form, crippling any collective action (Read, 2009) aspiring to draw 'lines of flight' within the ensemble of state apparatuses. The discursive formulation of the recent socioeconomic developments, usually termed as 'the Greek crisis', seems to fortify and rationalize this dominant conceptualization of the working self: blaming the country's malaise on the irresponsibility of its people, the 'remodelling' of both the state and its citizens according to the entrepreneurial prototype emerges as the only alternative.

Discourse has been our focal point, for it is discourse that powers the symbiotic interplay between the subjective and the social, 'hosting' their mutual constitution, manifesting at the same time their dynamic relation. For the purposes of this study, we explored how Greek employees engage with interpretations of the 'crisis' and the subjective positions they entertain, when talking about paid work. Although the patterns we came across seem contradictory at first glance, most of them resort to the dominant definitions of the social.

Apart from the participants who drew upon forms of intelligibility that privilege the collective rather than the individual, mobilizing a class-anticapitalistic discourse as we named it, the interviewees tended to prefer subject positions made available by hegemonic discourses. More specifically, individuals brought into play discursive formulations that revolved around 'personal agency', sanctioning the privatization of responsibility that has been institutionalized by public practices, entrepreneurial discourses and media texts, further banalizing the exclusions and power disparities it produces. Coinciding with previous studies on lay people's talk about personal health (Crawshaw, 2012), safety at work (Rasmussen, 2013) and unemployment (Gibson, 2011), among others, this article indicates that the marked 'shift from social security to individualized risk-management'(Fournier, 2014: 311) has turned into common sense and is reproduced through quotidian communication. Individualistic polices and solutions are thus rendered obligatory and inevitable thanks to the mundane embodiment of the neoliberal dogma.

Counter-hegemonic discourses that uphold a critical approach to the 'crisis' and work are available; nevertheless, it looks as if they are not in a position to establish alternative conceptualizations of the social. The grassroots social movements that have gained momentum lately, enacting alternative subjectivities and challenging the mainstream discursive nexus, have definitely played a pivotal role in renegotiating the self-evidence of the primacy of the market and the diffusion of an antagonistic discourse (e.g. Douzinas, 2013). However, although spaces of resistance are carved on a daily basis on every societal level, only the criticism of the harshest tenets of the neoliberal doctrine has circulated more widely; capitalocentrist discourse (Gibson-Graham, 1996) seems to stand beyond reproach, claiming for itself the status of undisputed objectivity, apparently handling extremely efficiently its internal tensions and cracks.

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Note

1. 'SYRIZA' is the Coalition of Radical Left party, which won the last two general elections, the first time (January, 2015) promising not to follow the 'Memorandum politics' and the second time (September, 2015) promising to counter-balance the negative impact of the Memorandum it did actually sign.

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