

The Social Pathology of Unemployment

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Abstract

This presentation is attempting to present the general patterns of unemployment in Greece today. Through this, emphasis is given to the social dimensions of the phenomenon. These are unavoidably increasing social inequality and social exclusion of a significant proportion of the population. The resulting social problems are leading to a social pathology which increases through the individual problems of the unemployed persons. This social pathology is explained through the theories of “Dual Labor Market” and “Deskilling”. Through a rather pessimistic point of view, the presentation is closing with an estimation for future trends, relating to the negative effects of globalization.

Introduction

The central aim of this paper is to show that unemployment creates and augments a social pathology. After all, as it is supported, unemployment is directly connected with the current structure of work and, as such, it is an unavoidable aspect of our social reality.

This presentation started being prepared under very different conditions of the topic it deals with. The difficult economic period in which Greece and a number of other countries has entered, may render any statistical data

outdated very fast. But, the central theme for a structural explanation not only applies, but it becomes more relevant.

I would like for this presentation not to be typically value-free in the Weberian sense, as used by Peter Berger (Berger, 1963). In other words, I will not remain an outside neutral observer presenting data and interpreting them. On the contrary, any reference to statistical data is made with a wish for critical approach and interpretation with the help of arguments of the conflict theory.

Unemployment Today

One of the phenomena that characterize the Greek labor market today (called as a dysfunction by some) is the difficulty to match the supply and the demand for work. In other words there is an inconsistency in “matching” the demands of the work position with the qualifications of the worker. This difficulty is present among unemployed persons who do not have adequate professional guidance or access to the sources of information for available jobs. It is also a problem of the businesses which cannot easily locate a worker with the required skills for a particular position.

It is generally accepted that unemployment is kept at a high level with increasing trends. The table that follows is presenting the general picture of unemployment in Greece.

Table 1. Percent of Unemployment by Gender, Greece, December 2004 – December 2009.

	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009
Male	6,6	6,4	6,0	6,1	6,5	6,9
Female	16,7	14,4	14,1	13,0	12,2	14,8
Total	10,7	9,7	9,3	8,9	8,9	10,2

Source: National Statistical Service of Greece, Labor Force Survey December 2009.

Unemployment and Social Pathology

It has to be understood that unemployment is not about some statistical data or a condition that you either are or are not, but primarily it has to do with the danger of social exclusion. Behind the numbers there are persons

who lose their self-definition. Working is necessary in our societies, not only to earn a living, but especially because economic activity is considered as a central axis of the definition of the self. This approach is giving a dynamic understanding and is putting the whole issue at its correct context. Only in this way it becomes clear that any personal troubles of the unemployed persons are felt in a more extreme way due to the structural inequalities existing in society. We have to explain unemployment as a social problem and not as an individual one.

In a brief way, we can present some social consequences of unemployment:

- Those working feel less secure, due to less bargaining power and downward pressure on wages.
- Workers are less willing to leave unsatisfying jobs, due to the fear of remaining unemployed. This creates more frustrated and alienated workers.
- Societal divisions increase. The unemployed are likely to blame weak groups in society for their problems, e.g. women, minorities.
- Social problems increase: suicide, marital breakdown, hooliganism.

Unemployment and Social Exclusion

By the nature of the problem, unemployed individuals are experiencing big amounts of social exclusion. In its extreme form, this social exclusion can be connected with the term “underclass”. This is widely used in the relevant bibliography and its use has spread through the work of William Julius Wilson, *The Truly Disadvantaged* (1990). According to Wilson, the main characteristic of this group is its chronic exclusion from social institutions such as education and work and, as a result, they experience social marginalization. The group becomes not only poor but also passive toward its condition and, as a result, it never exits this vicious cycle. (Wilson, 1990). The lack of education leads to a permanent condition of unemployment. Maybe this is a very dramatic description of a real situation that is experienced by increasing larger segments of the population. I believe that it describes accurately the condition of persons who have stopped looking for jobs because they are discouraged and they have no access to information. This describes very accurately many migrant groups.

The Sociological Explanation of Unemployment

Dual Labor Market

There have been many efforts to explain this social exclusion described above (Tsiakalos, 1998, Moussourou, 1998). The theoretical model that explains better the problems of inclusion and exclusion of certain groups is the “Dual Labor Market” theory. According to this view, the labor market is not unified, but it consists of autonomous segments. The supporters of this view believe that ignoring the different characteristics of these segments and the structural disadvantages they impose, make impossible to understand the nature of the drawbacks of the labor market. The central argument of this theory is the existence of two labor markets: the primary and the secondary. The primary market is characterized by stable employment, higher earnings, and worker benefits, while the secondary market includes occupations with low wages, without the possibility of mobility or the existence of benefits. In this, secondary market we find the most undesirable jobs usually located in the heaviest and “dirty” sector of work. As such, the theory argues that there are no chances of movement of workers from one to the other labor market (Piore, 1979).

Consequently, the study of this issue has to consider each labor market separately. The theory supports that many of the positions of the secondary market remain vacant due to their temporary nature, the low prestige and the high risk involved. As such, groups like migrants, women, and those with low education are stuck in those unstable positions (Sanders and Nee, 1987). This instability and the temporary character creates a bigger risk for unemployment and social exclusion.

Data from the Labor Institute of GSEE (the workers Union in Greece) for the year 2000 are indicating that the temporary employment in Greece accounts for 13,1% of total employment (15,7% of women and 11,5% of men). During the 1990s it appeared to be declining after a significant growth in the 1980s, when it was 19%, compared to 9% of the average European Union rate for the same time. Temporary employment is connected mainly with unskilled

labor, since 27% of those temporarily employed are unskilled manual laborers, while 16% is employed as store salespersons (Kouzis, 2010).

The data of the Greek Statistical Service for the fourth trimester of the last two years agree with the above. As it is evident in the next table, the total proportion of the temporarily employed has more than doubled in 2009 as compared to 2008. In addition, in the more sensitive category for unemployment and social exclusion, that comprised of unskilled workers, manual laborers and petty self-employed, we notice an increase of 10 percentage points for the same time period.

Table 2. Percent of Temporary Employed, Total and Vulnerable Workers, Greece, 2008-2009.

Timeframe	Total % of Temporarily Employed	% of Temporarily Employed, Vulnerable Workers
4 th Trimester 2008	5,7	15,9
4 th Trimester 2009	12,2	25,8

Source: National Statistical Service of Greece, Labor Force Survey, 4th Trimester 2009.

Deskilling

The arguments of the Dual Labor Market theory are useful because they help us understand the structural limitations of the system for increasing number of groups which experience social exclusion. In other words, it explains why unemployed persons can not find a job. But, this theory does not explain why there is increasing proportion of unemployed persons among those who have jobs and end up losing them.

Here we need the assistance of another explanation: that of Deskilling. This is a long-term process through which work is downgraded. This result is reached through the fragmentation of work and the shrinking of the knowledge base of work. One of the strongest arguments in support of “deskilling” belongs to Harry Braverman. Braverman supports that the management breaks down work into smaller, repetitive and more boring tasks. The owners of the means of production, in their effort to cut down production costs, are not using workers with high skills for the production of the final product. On the contrary, they break down the process into smaller and simpler tasks and hire workers with lower skills, paying them less. As a

consequence, the more skilled workers are redundant and, therefore, not needed. Such examples include the shrinking in the number of traditional artisans and farmers (Braverman, 1974).

In addition, Braverman refers to the loss of skill in other, non-manual positions through a process he calls proletarianization. This argument is supporting that the lower levels of the middle class (the pink collar workers) consisting of office clerks, secretaries, and store assistants are experiencing a deskilling in the last decades. As a result they are increasingly not distinguished from the manual workers (the traditional proletariat). In the case of office workers, Braverman supports that as the businesses are growing, the modern office starts looking like a production line and each worker is carrying out a very specific and narrowly defined task. As such, many workers become redundant and lose their jobs. If we consider that the majority of workers in this sector are women, it can be easily understood why the proportion of unemployed women is more than double compared to men.

Estimation for the Future

One additional item that needs to be added to the above discussion is the role of globalization. We have to see any attempt for future estimation through this lens. The sudden increase of globalization at the economic level leads to the unprecedented growth of multinational corporations. These corporations, without any limitations at a local or national level, can transfer their production anywhere on the planet that will guarantee higher profit. As a result, factories are closing down in the so-called Western nations, sending thousands of workers to unemployment (Psimmenos, 1999). I believe that this trend will continue into the future and will create a larger number of unemployed persons both in Western and Third World countries.

Conclusion

This paper shows that unemployment as a problem transcends the individual level and is the result of structural inconsistencies of the structure of society. The dual labor market, the deskilling and globalization

are the structural characteristics of what I call social pathology. This pathology grows and produces more unemployment. As such, unemployment can not be eliminated.

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