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# **Immigrant Work Force in Greece: Social Inequalities, Labor and Crisis. The Road to Subsistence**

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## **Author's contribution**

*The sole author designed, analyzed, interpreted and prepared the manuscript.*

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## **ABSTRACT**

This article focuses on the subject of labor and social inequalities through an overview of classical sociological approaches and certain important recent Greek studies, having as their central subject the itineraries to subsistence of immigrants employed in personal services. The work force, undergoing radical change during periods of crisis, lies at the core of the classical sociological approaches, while the immigrant work force – and, mostly, people working in personal services and composing, through certain itineraries, a new service staff in Greece – lies at the core of the recent Greek studies. The question is how exactly this shift happens, that is how an employment relationship turns into subsistence.

*Keywords: Immigration; crisis; labor; social inequalities; sociology of work; sociology of immigration; subsistence.*

## **1. INTRODUCTION**

Social injustices consist in the major problem in the science of Sociology. The reason is the fact that they define the position of people in society and create the institutions, the beliefs, the roles and the values with which the existing structures of social stratification and power are stabilized and the new ones are legalized. Social

inequalities are the ones that delineate social mobility and define the extent to which people can access fundamental goods, such as health, education, accommodation and social protection.

Social injustices play an important role in Marxist and Weberian analysis of labor, as well as in middle range theories, because they connect the limits and the obstacles of social mobility with the

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work ethic, the making of the worker's identity and his/her relationship to the employer environment, the status the worker occupies in his/her family and the local community and his/her perceptions about social welfare.

The Functional School focuses on the subject of the people's incorporation into the social system through labor, the Marxist and Weberian tradition highlights the theme of social reproduction and social control of people through labor, while the micro-sociological approach and the School of Chicago mostly touch upon the theme of social identity and how it is carved through labor, that is through the relationships developed there, the social roles people are called to fulfil and the typical and informal networks of power that are at work.

In the present article we are essentially examining the meaning the subjects give to their labor and at the same time the way in which their labor forms the subjects' hermeneutical framework. This is why the studies that are selected here focus on the itinerary of immigrant workers towards a job and inside it – and not only on their work as such, because only through examining someone's itinerary in a profession we can form a satisfactory image of the implicit processes taking place so that values can be internalized – such as subservience, dependence etc., values that define wholly the form of an employment relationship and the identity a worker develops.

We are led to this thought first of all by the international bibliography and research.

## **2. CLASSICAL SOCIOLOGICAL APPROACHES: WORKERS AMID CRISIS**

Coxon [1] mention that the question "what is your occupation" consists in the most important factor so that someone can understand the society surrounding him/her, as well as himself/herself inside it. Furthermore, the constant fear that someone may lose their occupation – as it happens in low status and temporary occupations and services where immigrants are occupied – and the despair they are led to because of this fear, consist in the strongest factor during the formation of occupational identity (and their dependence on their employers), because the subject understands himself/herself, his/her work and the others mostly through fear, despair and loss. This

happens gradually and implicitly. Furthermore, the forms of solidarity people usually turn to in hard times – such as the state, syndicates, community and family – cease to be valid in the case of the immigrants, because we are dealing with individuals who usually have no access to any of those forms. The incapacity of using any form of solidarity becomes the main characteristic of these "disconnected" people; this is why they turn to the informal networks of protection that have been formed and, of course, to an ever increasing "bonding", in the sense of dependence, with the employer environment.

W.E.B. Du Bois, in his work *The Philadelphia Negro* [2] responds to the same sociological problem, that is how the work ethic, work values and the process of the formation of the worker who lives, works and dreams inside specific frameworks of social mobility are formed and constituted. There, as the writer brings up, among the social problems (crime/drugs etc.) of the African-American community of Philadelphia, are the limits of community access to sources of survival, social rights and life chances – a fact that was essentially limiting the community to low status jobs and, of course, crime. According to Du Bois, the forms of discrimination that led the members of the African-American community to low status jobs were based on inherited characteristics – such as skin colour, submissiveness and cast – and not on rational evaluation. This interests us a lot in the present article's analysis, because Du Bois' study's result reminds us that occupational identity is not a notion that can be constituted theoretically or politically or, more generally, "from above" and with the terms of the dominating political speech or political correctness. On the contrary, the real values surrounding occupation are mostly based on stereotypical perceptions (such as cast, colour and submissiveness) and people are undergoing the delineation of their lives, directly or implicitly, through stereotypes. This is why in the present article we are interested in tracing the itinerary of the workers and the way in which the subjects interpret their situation. Hence Gunnar Myrdal [3] in the second volume of *An American Dilemma* highlights the importance of racial cast in the making of social stratification and how this distinction creates the work force that will be implicitly "led" to respective occupations and of course the importance of social consent that this social reproduction demands. The relationships, perceptions and expectations that empower the process of social reproduction itself, are based on a work ethic that

is nonetheless carved through stereotypes, as Du Bois showed us, but it also appears that in times of crisis, according to Myrdal, the emerging work ethic brings back old or constructs new stereotypes in order to define the new limits of social mobility and to have people “locked up” in specific situations, this time through the shock of social change that a period of crisis brings. And the decision to move from one’s own country is fundamentally a process or crisis, as it contains the shock of change.

This is exactly what Tomas & Znaniecky maintain in their historic study *The Polish Peasant* [4], studying the change of occupational values during their immigration from agricultural Poland to the industrialized West. The disruption of the workers’ social life lies according to the researchers at the core of the process of change of their work ethic. The shock of change from the Polish organization of society to the American and the attempt to modify and readjust their preexisting values to the new circumstances, gradually and implicitly deregulated the bonds and the institutions (such as family) that were considered as a central factor for the link of economy to society, pivotal so that the subject can interpret himself/herself and recognize him/her as a member of a community. Polish workers were cut off and stayed socially hovering. Their value standards were radically altered.

Melvin Seeman (1959) focuses on this change and the way (the processes) in which the worker is called to remodify himself/herself according to the new value demands that emerge during periods of radical change (such as migration), adopting values that have been implicitly carved by alienation and anomy that the crisis/change brings. Therefore, he maintains that the despair created during the crisis, this sense of inaptitude, favors the belief in imaginary causes – such as fate – which, in turn, leads to the lack of trust in anything that is real, such as the institutions, community or family. This lack of trust becomes implicitly wider and starts containing all the typical standards of function – before the crisis – of the regulatory framework, until their finite rejection and the adoption of new value and regulatory standards. The result of this process is the man’s isolation from the wider society and the creation of groups of people who share the same credo (informal networks of protection), so that the new value standard can somehow be fixed. In the end of this process, Seeman predicts the finite disconnection of the old value standards from the people’s life experience and,

as a result, the perception of the work ethic and its values to only as functional, that is as a means to achieve other goals, such as staying in the job or in the country or, more generally, survival. This way of thinking can of course generate questions, because it seems to be overlooking the fact that however functionally someone believes that he is enacting service duties (for example in the case of immigrant domestic workers) the exclusion from other forms of solidarity implicitly leads them to an ever greater financial and emotional dependence on the employer family, resulting in finally serving it, not only non-functionally, but, on the contrary, serving it with pre-capitalist/feudalist devotion, as we will later on see.

This is why Richard Brown [5] places particular emphasis upon financial, welfare and social isolation of people inside their occupation, as it can be detected in postindustrial world and the forms of work ethic that are being formed. And he stresses that the particular emerging moral values of an occupational system that comes as the result of the restructuring of economy, the financial destruction of states and the closure of production units of industrial and agricultural production, leads to the respective criteria of organizing labor. It is essentially the destruction of the forms of solidarity and the shift of the working class to individualistic perceptions of life and labor, something apparent also in the work of Beynon & Glavanis [6].

### **3. RECENT GREEK STUDIES: THE ROAD TO SUBSERVIENCE**

The recent Greek studies on the matter that are gathered in the present article, are part of an international bibliographical discourse, which is developing today and tries to understand how the new work markets are being formed globally, what are the work conditions that appear as a result and how, finally, these create the social stereotypes through which the new forms of social inequalities are being constructed. Giving priority to the Marxist and Weberian analysis as a method of understanding contemporary problems, the specific studies take the traditional dialogue around the matter of the development of occupation a step further, arguing that the problem is occupation itself, from the moment that the new jobs that are developed and the work conditions that accompany them, create people that are automatically placed at the social margins.

What are the processes that push and trap the migrant workers in personal services? What is the nature of these occupations and what is the collective action of the people occupied in them? How is the specific work force formed and through which itineraries is it led to subservience? What social relationships lead the choice of professions, what are the forms of employment, the division of duties, the control of occupation and the methods of its reproduction?

These are some among the central questions which the recent Greek studies on the subject try to respond to. Interdisciplinarity, mostly drawing from the schools of sociological method, but also the sciences of History and Anthropology, helps shed light upon the parameters which compose personal services and the culture of subservience in the country today.

The aim of these studies is to bring to the surface the ways in which the organization of society creates and reproduces the work force of personal services. How, that is, the social inequalities, through discriminations, exclusions, stratifications and deprivations of spiritual and material goods, freedom of choice, prospects of development and life opportunities, define the limits of the people's survival and form their acceptable skills, through which the existing social hierarchies are naturalized and the new ones emerge.

More specifically, in the past few years, the establishment of the neoliberal imperatives and the deregulation of the welfare state led to two powerful social modifications:

- a) The gradual annulation of the traditional signs of discrimination in the division of labor – *such as specialization, knowledge and experience (broad qualifications/skills)* – through the return of the inherited qualifications of the work force – *such as gender, colour, origin (generic skills)*.
- b) The displacement of the responsibility of prosperity from the state and the society to the individual and the family.
- c) The depreciation of the institutionalized social policy from the subjects and their turn towards the informal networks of protection and the individual scenarios of survival.

These changes had as a basic result the new legalization of social inequalities. Firstly because of the identification of work capabilities with

genetic human characteristics. Secondly with the reacquisition and establishment of a generalized ideology of individual liability in front of social problems. And, finally, because of the way in which the internalization of this reality is taking place by the subjects, that is how it impacts on the formation of their perceptions about social protection.

Out of these studies it is apparent that the workers are not expecting anything anymore, neither by the institutions and the state, nor by any participatory process. These people survive by improvising, being socially hovering and alone, having the informal networks of social protection as their only hope – these, however, are gradually carving their occupational subservience. A common example, here, in order to realize that, is the fact that the immigrant woman and man, who work in the domain of personal services, are getting help for almost all of their problems by the family of their native employers, something that leads them to consider the family of their employers as a real family of their own and, finally, to develop a precapitalist type of bonding and gradually be led to subservience.

Does this gradual formation of a new immigrant work force in the field of personal services in contemporary Greece, which seems to be leading towards entering work relationships that include commitment and dependence (financial, emotional, psychological, symbolic) of a feudal type and that make this employment resemble more to subservience than to an employment relationship, look like a deviation from the dominant system of production process of labor? The answer is no.

Psimmenos [7-12] maintains that the creation of the new subservient class in contemporary Greece relates to the greater organization of society and does not consist in a deviation (from it). The three stages (preparation, placement, socialization) that form, define and reproduce the immigrant work force that is being led to personal services and subservience, contradict the neoliberal rhetoric about the “choice” of employment: people are being led to specific occupations, through a series of social exclusions, which the production itself produces from the moment that it defines and controls the roles, the perceptions and the stereotypes in the globalized and local division of labor.

The immigrant work force “prepares” to be employed in low status occupations a long before

they seek work in their host countries. Through the systematic corrosion and deregulation of labor gains, the politics of dealing with immigration that increase the dependence of people from illegal networks and traffickers, the bankruptcy of values and social bonds in societies of origin, the dependence of socially accepted skills on stereotypes and on the basis of personal resilience, people internalize and legalize subservience and they are therefore manipulated so that they can work in occupations determined by nation, race and gender and characterized by temporality, social stigma, distinctions and welfare marginalization.

In Psimmenos and Skamnakis [13], who studied the immigrant domestic workers from Albania and Ukraine, we owe the terms welfare marginalization and change to welfare orientations, through which we can better understand how immigrant domestic workers are led to the informal networks of protection and to the even bigger dependence of their lives from the employer family – and therefore from subservience. Subservience is the result of a silent itinerary inside a profession, it is not a situation that the individual can immediately identify.

Social relations in the home country, the way of migration (individual or as a family) that the immigrant women choose, the family structure in the home country, the job they used to do there and their educational level, consist in basic parameters, that influence their perceptions around social protection. Despite the objective problems (lack of work papers which leads to informal/uninsured work and the informal/uninsured work that makes getting or renewing papers more difficult, the multi-employer occupation or domestic occupation which makes institutional/typical social protection more difficult, development of bonds with the employer family, through emotional work, that leads to the gradual cutting off from family in the home country), in order to be able to understand how a domestic worker can be led to subservience, we need to pay attention to the specific characteristics of each itinerary.

For example, the Albanian domestic workers, escorting their families to Greece, work in the homes of the natives as hourly-paid cleaners, offering some more income to their home – verifying in that way the gender-based stereotype they were already carrying – ‘of the cleaning lady’. On the other hand, Ukrainian immigrants,

who are mostly occupied as internal domestic workers, use the total of their salary in order to pay the debts that were necessary so that they could enter the country and their family's maintenance commitments in their home country. In both cases one can observe that through their work these women make part of a particular gender-based prototype of roles and relationships inside the employer's family, receiving as a reimbursement for their work and their loyalty the ability to cover their basic needs (health, accommodation, protection of children, intervention in potential problems with the law), something that is leading them to patronage, social exclusion and, finally, to dependence and subservience.

It is in that way that the gradual shift of the immigrant women's welfare orientations is taking place, that is, through their contact with the paternalistic system of domestic work and their exclusion from the rest of the social networks (family, unions etc.), the domestic workers form new perceptions about social protection. The protection ceases to be a work entitlement which every member of the society can enjoy and becomes the result of their subservience, that is the adaptability of the worker to the employers' demands.

Hatzaroula (2012) reminds us that the making of submissiveness – this “preparation” that Psimmenos observes – is something rooted in the way service work has been orchestrated in Greece for a long time now.

In her attempt to reply to the question of how subservience is carved, Harzaroula unravels the thread of paid domestic work in the first half of the twentieth century in Greece, examining the phenomenon through the angle of the relationship between employer and domestic worker. The domestic worker here is an immigrant of internal migration or Greek refugee – the main source of research is the personal accounts of women from the interwar period and the Second World War. Placing at the core the voice and the narrations of domestic workers, with the methodology of oral history, she deduces that – exactly as it happens with the case of immigrant domestic workers from the nineties and beyond, that Psimmenos is examining – domestic work is not just a profession, but happens to relate to specific classes, origins and gender. It is the social division of labor itself that creates the appropriate stereotypes, with which the inferiority is internalized by the workers

themselves and their subordination is carved. The historic studies, the documents and the life stories presented here, reveal that subservience is not a new reality in Greece, but, on the contrary, that there are historic continuities and discontinuities, which can interpret the phenomenon and its origins, from then until today.

Furthermore, Hatzaroula refers to the matter of subservient subjectivity in domestic workers and traces the process through which it is produced. She focuses on the technologies applied by the employers so that they create a subject at their service and on the realization by the workers of the mechanisms through which they were constituted as subordinate and what this subservient subjectivity means for the rest of their lives.

Going back to the immigrant work force, the studies by Xypolytas [14] and Lazarescu [15] place at the core of their argument both the socially determined division of labor in the low status occupations and the values that underlie these occupations, two parameters (social division of labor and occupational value system) that result in the reproduction of entrapment and subordination of the workers. Xypolytas and Lazarescu, through the lens of traditional sociological approaches and also through collecting oral testimonies through interviews, like Psimmenos and Hatzaroula, study the entrance and the stay of the work force in Greece and detect, in particular, the development of a work force that pushes the immigrants in low status occupations and, in particular, domestic work. This process naturalizes not only their position in society, but also the perception they themselves develop about this position. In that way, they get trapped inside the occupation. The two writers, each in his/her own study, conclude that the exclusion of the immigrants and their integration to low status occupations in Greece consist in a social and political construction and not just a simple acceptance of reality.

In the same framework of reference, Papadopoulou's study focuses on a latent socialization (or de-socialization of values and participatory networks) of the immigrants and the processes of construction of their social exclusion, that result in the creation of a work force that prepares their expectations so that it is employed in low status occupations. Through empirical research, the writer finds that the

subject of equality in the immigrants' work does not consist in a solitary case, but it is based on the wider social and ethical construction of contemporary Greek society.

Vasilikou [16] introduces the reader to the subject of the internationalist family, bringing to light the contemporary theoretical approaches that relate to this problem. The writer explains that the organization of occupation itself of the women who are occupied in personal service in the host country, forms their values around family, resulting in the appropriation of life examples, that are less linked to the security of the primary solidarity networks and more to the flexibility and adaptability to the changes accompanying the profession.

Finally, Fouskas' study [17] highlights the difficulties of development for trade unionist action of the immigrant work force in Greece, as one more factor of excision from the solidarity and welfare networks, placing the problem not as much on the political decisions as to the nature of the social division of labor of the immigrants itself – something which almost all the researchers note. The framework and the conditions of employment of the immigrants, the structures of the labor market, the limits between illegal and legal status of stay in the country where the division of labor itself creates and the inability to reunite with family, create in the immigrants, men and women, the values and the habits that lower their expectations about a better life through their participation in collective networks of claim and representative bodies [18,19].

#### **4. CONCLUSION**

To conclude, in this article we focused on the subject of labor and social inequalities, realizing an overview of classical sociological approaches concerning periods of crisis and some important recent Greek research studies, having the itineraries of subservience of immigrants who are occupied in personal services as their central theme. The question was how an employment relationship becomes subservient occupation. What is the road that leads to that? We saw that these studies, using the basic sociological axes of analysis (historical framework, objective substance, subjective dimension) manage to highlight the problem of contemporary subservience in Greece as a whole and to reply to their initial question regarding the ways in which such a work force is constructed and the

processes that replicate/reproduce it. This scientific work of the above Greek studies is developed in a particular time regarding the institutional and political future of Europe and Greece, amid protracted financial and social crisis, reminding us that the financial and political deadlocks of men and societies consist in products of social injustice and not vice versa.

### COMPETING INTERESTS

Author has declared that no competing interests exist.

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