The Entrepreneurial Spirit of Industrial Laborers: Household-Based Ventures and the Greek Economic Crisis in a Post-Industrial City

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1 Chalkida, where I conducted fieldwork from April 2015 to December 2016, is a mid-sized post-industrial Greek city of Central Greece and capital of the island of Evia with a population of 100,000 people. It is located eighty kilometers north of Athens and attracted the installation of several factories in its vicinity since the late nineteenth century. When I entered the field in April 2015, the city of Chalkida had fallen into socio-cultural and economic decay. One could see abandoned factories both within and outside of the city. The lack of public funds in unmaintained and undeveloped public infrastructure was palpable. One could grasp the broken dreams that laid on abandoned construction projects and sense the general state of destitution, despair and hopelessness in the shadow cast over the city. Since 2010, the crisis of austerity accelerated the process of de-industrialization and produced social and cultural shocks that left no one unaffected. Between 2011 and 2013, nearly 3,100 industrial workers lost their jobs in Chalkida according to Evia's trade union. The closure of Chalkida's cement factory alone was a major shock to local society.

2 On 26 March 2013, the administration of the factory summoned its employees to the main warehouse of the factory and declared its closure. Lafarge SA, the French multinational cement giant, that had owned the factory since 2001, decided to abandon its multi-million euro investment, sell the factory's emission rights and lay-off 236 factory workers shortly after the implementation of the second memorandum
agreement between Greece and its creditors. A special amendment in labor restructurings that was included, paved the way to mass lay-offs and significantly downplayed established national labor rights. As a result, large firms, such as Chalkida’s cement plant, could massively lay-off workers by firing 5% of the total labor force each month. Using crisis as an excuse, the administration of the factory justified its decision as a strategic move towards restructuring its global cement production in the post-crisis world. The last batch of ten workers were eventually laid-off in July 2015, yet the cement factory workers continued their struggle as they had appealed to national and international labor courts. Every morning they met at a kiosk in Chalkida’s city center to make their struggle visible, while at nights, they gathered at the premises of the factory and arranged night shifts to guard its facilities from potential thefts. According to the trade union of the factory, since 2004, Lafarge had set forward a plan to reduce the labor force by offering attractive severance pay schemes to laborers who were close to retirement, and especially to those who were members of the factory’s trade union. In 2007, Lafarge attempted to undermine the role of the union and impose cuts on salaries and benefits to the workers, however, back then, the trade union and the factory workers managed to stop such efforts. As the workers told me, what Lafarge wanted to do back then, was included in the second memorandum agreement.

Chalkida’s cement factory has been an emblematic industrial unit that operated in the area since 1926 and had set the foundations of Chalkida’s industrial identity and modern character. Over the eighty-seven years of its operation, multiple generations of laborers had worked there, and many households relied on it for their social reproduction. Wherever I went in Chalkida, I heard people talking about the factory’s closure, and as my research progressed, I realized that almost everyone in the city had either a direct or indirect connection through their socio-economic networks. Someone’s relative, a friend, a customer, or even themselves would report that they had worked there – either regularly or on short-term contracts. According to members of the trade union of the factory, in the 1980s, the factory had employed around 1,500 regular workers and many others through subcontracted labor schemes. Nearly one-tenth of Chalkida’s households had relied on the industrial labor income that the cement factory provided.

In addition, petty entrepreneurial activities that historically provided a viable alternative to waged labor were hit hard by the recent crisis and austerity measures. According to Evia’s trade union, sixty percent of small- and medium-sized firms closed during the first years of crisis as the direct outcome of neoliberal restructurings, increased taxation and the contraction of people’s purchasing power that was fueled by the massive loss of industrial job positions. Nearly one-fourth of the labor force in Greece is self-employed while most of these businesses consist of micro-enterprises in which the owner is the sole laborer. Self-employment is a diverse labor sector that is characterized by the direct sale of one’s labor to the market. Business owners in Greece identify with the term epicheirimatias (entrepreneur) which they endow with the qualities of being autonomous and self-reliant, or as people say, “to be your own boss.” This version of Greek entrepreneurialism is akin to the individualistic social and cultural model of capitalism, but being an entrepreneur in Greece is more literally translated as to “invent a job for yourself.” Owning a business entails a different approach to economics from that of a salaried person who has a fixed and stable income. This clearcut distinction between the salaried and the self-employed working
force is blurred, however, when we move our analysis to households that pool income from both labor sectors.

Hence, I focus my analysis on household-based entrepreneurial ventures of industrial laborers. I abide with Narotzky, who suggests prioritizing the household’s functions over its morphology and rejects the idea of studying the household as a consumption unit. Thus, I focus on social reproduction practices by following Smith and Wallerstein, who define the household as a resource pooling unit. In the context of the recent Greek economic crisis, I examine how people design livelihood projects and access resources at the household level in order to unravel how austerity policies reconfigure household economies and future expectations. Defining the household as a resource pooling unit averts the risk of reifying households to social actors as Yanagisako warns. Household strategies are devised through resource pooling which entails a certain level of shared responsibilities and future aspirations that expand beyond residential units and stretch over networks of intimate relationships of interdependence. Households are dynamic social and economic micro-structures that can modify their boundaries to adapt to wider social, political and economic processes. In times of economic crisis, marked by such events as austerity restructurings of the welfare sector, soaring unemployment rates or vast contractions of income resources, the role of household and its domestic networks of proximity are upgraded. Following Collins, who elaborates on the emergence of nuclear households and capitalist development in the Peruvian Andes where the extended family used to contain a central role in socio-economic organization, I show how nuclear household units in Greece, during the recent past, were reorganized to counterbalance the reduction of income resources and to sustain social reproduction practices. Underlying domestic networks of mutual support based on kinship proliferated during this time. In that sense, one could argue that resource scarcity forced people to strengthen intergenerational relations of interdependence. During the austerity crisis, households modified their boundaries and formed domestic networks that circulated resources, such as income, credit and care. This arrangement resembles a decentralized extended family household in which members shared common interests and in which the wellbeing of smaller units was co-determined by the wellbeing of other units.

Furthermore, households provide an analytical space to unpack the wider sociological concerns around class, as they often consist of people who hold different, if not, contradictory class locations. I follow Wright, who examined contradictory class locations in order to understand how class can pose a dynamic analytical category that explains the ways global capitalism establishes itself in diverse socio-cultural settings. For instance, self-employed entrepreneurs often function as capitalists (i.e. owning the means of production) and in several instances, they are driven by aspirations that abide with the capitalist economic culture of profit maximization, capital accumulation and exploitation. However, in line with real life conditions and challenges, self-employed micro-entrepreneurs, who work at their own firm, do not manage to earn much more than a salaried employee and their profit-making activities and scale of operation are confined to the local markets. Wright’s analysis on class locations shows the multiplicity and the complexity of class relations in modern capitalist societies, while at the level of the household, those diverse class locations produce complex class relations. Kalb, through an ethnographically grounded analysis of class, elaborates how ethnography is ideal for capturing the multiplicities and relational positionalities
of class which is necessary to understand capitalist variations through a holistic, global perspective and at the critical junctures of capitalist modernities.

In this article, I showcase, by combining political economy with ethnography, how industrial labor income and entrepreneurship were interwoven in the formation of the Greek working middle classes. Focusing on grassroots economic projects at the level of the household and the strategies people devised towards social mobility, I argue that a great portion of the Greek population instead of being proletarianized, has been “entrepreneurialized” by the capitalist model of Greek development. As Narotzky points out, labor is a problematic analytical concept that has to be refined by ethnographic data that reflect on historical, economic and cultural specificities. That is the case of my ethnographic endeavors with households of industrial laborers in Chalkida that harnessed the ideals of entrepreneurship and were involved in various types of entrepreneurial activities.

In the life histories of my informants, who were either themselves engaged in entrepreneurial activities or had household members so engaged, three types of “business owner” can be discerned. The first type is defined by the desire to be one’s own boss, and the freedom it entails to have “your own business.” Indeed, I interviewed several (micro-)entrepreneurs who were formerly employed in the region’s industrial sector and opted out of it to establish their own ventures and to pursue upward social mobility. The second type consists of those who were forced into self-employment due to factory closures and the lack of other opportunities for local salaried employment. In that sense, self-employment had, in many instances, subsumed the small-scale local crises caused by de-industrialization in Chalkida and promoted economic growth. Instead of seeking employment in another factory (that could include the possibility of residential change), these entrepreneurs took the risk to found their own firms. The third category, which I find even more interesting and hardly ever documented, is that of industrial laborers who used their wages as a capital provisioning asset and founded commercial firms in the names of their wives or children. This path was undertaken for two reasons: 1) to increase the household’s overall income and 2) to create employment for other household members. This third category reveals that household-based ventures, unlike other salaried jobs, consist of an inheritable asset and can take the form of an intergenerational project. Moreover, the venture becomes an extension of the household unit, as it contributes to the common pool of resources. I collected my material through repetitive semi-structured interviews, life and work histories, participant observation in workplaces and households of diversely situated people and by following key informants in their everyday socio-economic activities. Furthermore, I consulted the Archives of Evia’s Industrial and Commercial Chamber and the urban planning bureau of the municipality of Chalkida to find supplementary material for the city’s industrial development and urban expansion.

Departing from a political economy perspective, I employ an interscalar approach that links grassroots models of employment with historical capitalist developments in order to acknowledge the structuration of grassroots economic projects through upper- and lower-scale economic transformations. In the first part of this article, I examine how industrialization, urbanization and household transformations contributed to the development of class structure and grassroots economic models in Chalkida. I showcase how partial proletarianization and multi-employment phenomena are entangled with
the particular Greek model of capitalist development. By providing ethnographic evidence, I argue that a major part of the Greek labor force experienced entrepreneurialization instead of proletarianization. In the second part, I explore how the implementation of austerity interacted with household-based entrepreneurial projects and assess the ways households modified their boundaries and altered their functions, to meet with the austerity crisis and the breakdown of expectations.

The making of the Greek working middle classes: capitalist development and socio-economic transformations

Industrialization and male multi-employment

As it has been thoroughly documented, after the 1950s, Greece experienced a rapid capitalist growth driven by industrial investments and the construction sector. These scalar transformations were reflected at grassroots level by the vast rural to urban migratory flows of peasant, usually impoverished populations. Chalkida’s prominent geographic location and its rich natural resources offered an ideal setting for the industrial development that attracted people from rural areas. Alongside the industrial economy, the commercial sector offered multiple opportunities as the population’s purchasing power was growing. The development of industrial activities made self-employment a viable alternative to waged labor. Self-employed local entrepreneurs were able to exploit business opportunities in undeveloped and emerging economic fields that large capital could not reach. The unpaid reproductive labor of women enabled men to pursue various career paths that included both industrial labor and self-employment. This model of multi-employment vis-à-vis small agricultural land ownership prevented the complete proletarianization of the labor force in provincial cities such as Chalkida.

Before the 1950s, and more especially before the Second World War, waged employment opportunities in Greece were very scarce and only a small portion of the urban population had access to stable, monthly salaries. Other people had to juggle multiple income resources to get by: many combined seasonal waged employment with agricultural and commercial activities through formal and informal labor schemes of self-employment. In Chalkida for instance, where a cement factory had opened in 1926, an otherwise rural population worked on demand at the factory, but cultivated and harvested their crops in the meantime. This particular economic culture is similar to that documented for Frioli, Italy, where peasant-workers formed an economic path that combined capitalism, modernity and tradition. Multi-employment became a pattern to many rural residents around the industrial cores, and this pattern was reproduced when they later moved into the city.

Chalkida’s cement factory was founded by two brothers from Istanbul as a small unit with surface mines and limited production capacity. As urbanization in Greece progressed after the resolution of the Greek civil war in the 1950s, the capitalist project of development accelerated and increased the need for cement. As the cement factory expanded, it drew seasonal laborers even from the rural areas of northern Greece; the factory provided food and accommodation on its premises for both those who worked on the production line and those who helped to construct the factory’s facilities.
Workers living in the rural areas around Chalkida could sustain their agricultural activities even in parallel to regular employment at the factory. As a result, the most intensive formation of the working middle classes in Greece in general, and Chalkida in particular, was akin to the so-called Third Italy Model, as many small and middle-sized enterprises (SMEs) were founded and offered their services to the growing industrial economy.

The great transformation of Chalkida into an industrial city occurred from 1962 to 1973 when Greece experienced unprecedented industrial growth. The military junta of 1967-1974 put forward a plan for intensive industrialization, and in implementing it, the regime sought to attract industrial investment by offering a host of privileges to investors. Many heavy industries appeared during the 1960s and 1970s that oriented their production towards the construction sector that was expanding rapidly to become the leading economic force. For example, Darigk, a former ice production factory that was founded in the 1920s near Chalkida’s city center, transformed itself in the 1960s to produce iron wire for fences and construction materials. In 1961, the toxic factory of Ellenit was founded in the Nea Lampsakos settlement of Asia Minor refugees. It processed asbestos construction materials, and its products were known all over Greece. At the same time, the multinational company Ideal Standard opened a production line of sanitary equipment in the area of Ritsona, next to Chalkida, thereby creating another industrial zone in agricultural land. Noteworthy was the foundation of the Greek Aeronautics Industry (EAB) and the industrial units by Elval and Viohalko that processed aluminum and copper. These three heavy industries paved the way to create the largest industrial district in Greece at the valley of the Asopos River located within the triangle of Oinofyta-Tanagra-Schimatari. Industrial employment became an attractive career option as it demanded skilled laborers.

Such is the case of Theofilos, a sixty-two-year-old man who had just managed to receive an old-age pension in 2016. I had the chance to talk with Theofilos in several instances and collect his life and work history. Theofilos moved to Chalkida at the age of nine with an older cousin from a mountainous village of Evia. He was sent to Chalkida to attend school and did various jobs to earn some money and cover his basic needs in food. His father, who used to operate a general store, visited Chalkida for business on a weekly basis to sell his merchandise and buy supplies. As soon as Theofilos finished elementary school, he got an apprenticeship at a local workshop and then managed to enter the technical school “Democritus” that the Industrial Chamber of Chalkida had founded in 1954. The school was meant to train the (male) labor force in the technical skills needed in the industrial sector. After that, work was easy for Theofilos. “In the 1970s, I had been receiving personal letters at my mailbox that offered me employment. One day you worked there, the other, someone else paid you more.” Theofilos worked at several industrial settings until he opted out to create his own construction firm.

The vast majority of Chalkida’s incoming population were unskilled workers who pursued industrial employment as a steppingstone to install themselves in Chalkida and start a new life. Makis, 63, a retired cement factory worker, whom I encountered at a neighborhood coffee shop said:

Work at the cement factory was hard. We worked under extreme weather conditions. In the winter, half covered in mud, out in the rain and cold, loading trucks and digging. In the summer, we melted by the heat, you can imagine…. There were many accidents too. It was easy to find a job at the tsimentadiko [cement
factory], but it was not easy [for someone] to stay. Most of them [the new workers] quit after a month or two.

Given the harsh working conditions, the salary was relatively higher than at the other factories, yet the lack of established working rights made industrial labor an unappealing socio-economic condition, especially before the establishment of labor rights in the 1980s. None of the cement factory workers I interviewed, for instance, wanted their children to become industrial laborers and sought to educate them to follow different career paths. Furthermore, many stressed the health hazards of their job and framed it as “sacrificing their health for the future generations.” Chalkida’s cultural reproduction was based on industrial labor, so if anyone wanted to stay in the city, the alternatives in terms of employment were civil service and self-employment, with the former being almost exclusively available through clientelism.

The emergence of nuclear household units

Between 1950 and 1990, the city’s population doubled, from 35,000 to 70,000 people. Other Greek cities experienced the same growth; the housing construction sector became a profitable business and there was increased domestic demand for cement. The Greek state had no housing plan for the incoming population, so their housing needs were covered by private initiatives. The construction sector became the leading economic force in Greece and provided various employment opportunities. The process of urban expansion was driven by a vast wave of creative destruction, engendered by the unique Greek phenomenon of the antiparochi (property-swap) system. Owners gave their land plots (with or without a house) to small- or medium-sized construction firms in exchange for receiving one or more modern apartments in the multi-story buildings that the firm planned to build. Informants recollected memories of homeowners who lined up at the construction firm offices to have their house demolished and thus create a buildable land plot where a block of flats could be erected. On the one hand, this was an effective housing solution for the growing population. On the other hand, because it occurred without a master plan and because there was no regulation of the construction industry and even few trained architects or civil engineers, the private-led construction transformed modern Greek cities, especially Athens, into formless, borderless and placeless urban landscapes.

Moreover, the antiparochi (property-swap) system had another impact at the core of social organization. It enabled nuclear families to have their own separate space. Extended family households were broken into smaller nuclear units as access to housing was much more available. The extended family model, however, was disguised and reproduced in the so-called oikogeniakes polikatoikies (family block of flats). This described a situation in which kin households owned multiple apartments in the same building. A common pattern emerged, for example, in which parents swapped their old house for multiple flats that would be given as a wedding gift to their offspring. Homeownership had become an intergenerational project that extended the household boundaries to the next generation. Households began to operate as distinct spaces but remained part of the extended kin household network that shared a common pool of resources. In that light, homeownership as Alen, Barlow, Leal, Laoutas and Padovani elaborate consisted of a private welfare system that counterbalanced the lack of modern welfare provisions. That arrangement fostered multiple transfers of income
and care among generations and cultivated long lasting relationships of intergenerational dependencies.

Female labor income contributed greatly to the emergence of the working middle classes and social mobility but was slow to emerge. Before about 1980, formal female employment opportunities were scarce. A few women, from the lower strata, were employed informally and were underpaid in low, unskilled job positions in the industrial sector (textile factories and food processing units). As soon as they married or had their first child, they dedicated themselves exclusively to household reproductive tasks. Had they belonged to a household which owned a business, women often appeared as a “helping hand” in the family firm that was registered in their husband’s or father’s name. Work outside of the household space was considered a socially shameful practice. It degraded the honor of the adult male members of the household because it suggested that they could not financially sustain their family and was a sign of poverty. Panayiota, the wife of Theofilos, was fifty-six and had never worked outside her household. When I asked her why, she replied: “My father did not want me to work, he did not want me to help at his business either.” Panayiota’s father owned a mpakaliko (general store) at a depreciated neighborhood of Chalkida near the old factories. Their household and their family business were located on the same floor of an old house her father had constructed with the help of relatives. As soon as Panayiota was married, the property was developed further by Theofilos, her husband, and two additional floors were added. One to host the newlywed couple and the other to create a rental income. When Panayiota’s mother died, she took care of her father who lived downstairs. Women in Greece are even today morally obliged to take care of the elderly, an obligation which is rooted in the context of traditional gendered division of labor and poor state provisions for the care for of the elderly. Homeownership posed an intergenerational form of informal welfare provision and the passing of assets to children as dowry or inheritance presumed the obligation of children to take care of their ageing parents.

**Socio-economic transformations and the “entrepreneurialization” of women**

After the 1980s, major social and political changes occurred that enabled women to access the labor market. The service sector, which was backed up by the consumer society model, opened up a large field of employment opportunities. Many women, usually the wives of industrial laborers, opened shops. These grassroots entrepreneurial activities were motivated by the necessity for an extra income resource, and later, to create the potential for financial security and future prosperity of their (nuclear) family. Thus, the household had become further integrated into the capitalist economy, as more and more women accessed the job market. Importantly, they entered not as proletarians, but as (micro-)entrepreneurs with the financial support and physical help of their husbands who were usually employed in the industrial sector. The loosening of social restrictions posed to women, coupled with the increased needs that consumer capitalism created, reformed household units into nuclear-family households that comprised two working adult members.

The undeveloped welfare state, however, pushed the burden of child-rearing to the extended family network, which enabled women to juggle through employment and
householding. In that sense, capitalist development was mediated by extended family structures that supported reproduction. As Maria, an eighty-year-old woman who had worked in several factories in Chalkida, elaborated:

We needed money, yes, I continued to work after my marriage, but when I gave birth, I had to quit, you know? I did not have relatives that could help me with childcare. I had a child, and then two more, and a husband that I had to take care of. I did not want my children to grow in the streets as me and my younger siblings had. My mother was away cleaning other people’s houses and sewing at workshops.

Then, thank God, my husband got a job at the cement factory and he earned enough to sustain a family.

22 Her daughter, Giorgia, who was forty-nine and lived upstairs, did not follow the same pattern. She had also entered work (service sector) before marriage but quit to give birth and raise her child. But with the support of her parents in childcare, she re-entered the job market and a few years later, in 1995, she decided to open her own business in the retailing sector, a field that she knew well thanks to her previous work experience. “I knew it would be more painstaking to have my own business, but it was a risk worth taking. My former bosses were all assholes, they treated you like shit, did not pay on time and often had absurd demands from their employees. So, yes, I decided to do it.” Giorgia, unlike her mother, had much different needs: “If I did not have my mother to help, it would not make sense for me working. Whatever money I could make, I would have to spend it on childcare,” she explained. “Having my own business and my own schedule was easier for me to raise my kid than having a 9-5 job.”

23 Needs, in the historical conjuncture in which they emerged, had been the main driving force that made imperative the formation of grassroots economic models of employment and led many women to aspire in getting involved in entrepreneurial initiatives.

**Financialization of the industrial sector**

24 In the 1980s, industrialization processes in Greece ground to a halt as the model of capital accumulation shifted from productive activities to financialized ones. In 1981, Greece became a full member of the European Economic Community (EEC) and elected its first socialist government. Unionization of the labor force affected the industrial sector which now also adhered to the European regulatory economic framework. New labor laws enabled workers to enjoy a range of welfare benefits. This produced a considerable shock for national and regional economies; the impacts of those structural shifts trickled down to the locality of Chalkida. The restructuring of industrial production caused many industries to close, however, the regional economy had the capacity to absorb those shocks and those who lost their jobs had many alternatives. They could seek a job at the factories that operated in the nearby areas of Oinofyta, Schimatari and Tanagra; they could become self-employed in the still-booming construction and service sectors; or they could migrate to Athens where there were yet other employment opportunities. No one, however, wanted to (re)turn to agriculture because farmers had much less income potential and lower socio-economic status. The decline in industrial jobs was counterbalanced by the increase in construction and thus, economic growth and capitalist expansion were sustained.25

25 In many instances, industrial workers took the opportunity to become their “own boss” and leave behind demanding and low-status industrial jobs.26 This move was made in
multiple ways. Some continued industrial labor but took informal employment in small and medium construction firms or other schemes to get an extra income. Others founded their own construction firms; although, they too did not necessarily quit their jobs. Instead, it could be that they registered the firm in their wife’s or mother-in-law’s name. Registering a firm to a relative’s name, and especially to unemployed women of another nuclear household, had many advantages: it helped to avoid excessive taxation of one’s own family income and it made the registered woman-owner eligible to receive a pension in the future, as she would appear to have paid contributions into the self-employed pension fund.

By the late 1990s, Greece’s industrial companies were listed on the stock market and thus became vulnerable to fluctuations in global markets. The coming of financial capitalism led to one of the biggest scandals in Greece’s modern economic history, the Athens Stock Exchange bubble. This bubble burst in 1999 and prompted mergers, sell-offs and closures in the industrial sector. These well-calculated, macro-level financial (dis)investments produced another radical restructuring of the industrial labor field and led to the loss of many job positions. Furthermore, subcontracting became a norm. Some employees at the cement factory founded their own subcontracting firms and secured contracts for the maintenance and development of the factory’s facilities from 1990s till its eventual closure. They had a dual status as both an employee and an entrepreneur while they worked for and with the same company.

In the first decade of the 2000s, after the Athens Stock Exchange scandal, the process of de-industrialization accelerated. Greece adopted the Euro in 2001, and this entrance into the Eurozone produced another big wave of de-industrialization and delocalization for those companies which were exporting goods to the European Union (EU). As local informants told me, many of the factories that had produced varied goods in the industrial areas of Chalkida found it more profitable to move their production abroad. In Greece, they switched their activity to logistics, using their former factories as distribution hubs. Those companies opted to produce at low cost abroad, import their own products and sell them at great profit margins to the Greek market which had started using euros. Well-trained industrial workers were left without jobs. As Matina, a fifty-seven-year-old business owner told me, the delocalized factories often hired Greek workers to train the new, unskilled laborers in the country to which they had relocated, usually Bulgaria, but also Romania, Turkey and other countries in the Balkan Peninsula that offered much lower production costs. “It was not only the factories we have lost and our jobs. We have also lost years of training. When the factories close, what are the specialized workers supposed to do?” she said, suggesting that factory closures had much deeper impact in the society, as it meant a deskillings of the labor force.

The de-proletarianization of the existing industrial laborers was accompanied with “entrepreneurialization.” Those people who managed to follow a career in the industrial sector and specialize, who had settled in Chalkida and formed a livelihood, faced the choice to relocate or switch career path. Self-employed entrepreneurship could be achieved by taking advantage of social and kinship networks. The gradual closure of factories from the 1980s onward was nearly complete by 2009, when only five heavy industry plants remained: Chalkida’s Cement, Shelman (wood processing), Neoset (furniture), Interkem (chemicals) and Ellinika Solinourgia (steel pipes). By 2013, even these had closed. The closure of the cement factory alone, which had been in
operation since 1926, produced a major identity shock for the city, which had thereby lost a constitutive aspect of its character. Narotzky and Goddard highlight the importance of heavy industries that link local livelihoods with the global economy and materialize global economic procedures into lived experiences. Similarly, the above-mentioned heavy industries that were based in Chalkida and operated at the global economic scale had the power to make and unmake local and regional models of economic development and shape local economic culture, such as the co-existence of industrial labor with various entrepreneurial initiatives. The disappearance of industrial labor income caused shifts at the organization of households which had to adapt their needs, modify their boundaries and reorganize the distribution of available resources towards social reproduction.

The entrepreneurial spirit of industrial laborers: household-based ventures and the Greek Economic Crisis

Entrepreneurialism in crisis

Contrary to the cultural stereotypes of Greeks being “lazy” or “living above their means” that were populistically reproduced by the media and EU officials in relation to the Greek economic crisis, the key to success that encompassed people’s livelihood aspirations was skliri douleia (hard work). By general consent, it was held that upward social mobility could be achieved by anyone who was willing to work hard in the liberal capitalism context. Job opportunities were plenty, and people sought to accumulate wealth through various labor schemes, often combining multiple sources of income. Since the 1950s and especially since the 1980s, people aspired to break free of poverty and envisioned a better future. Since the outburst of the economic crisis in Greece in 2009, people experienced the breakdown of their dreams and expectations as social mobility patterns were shattered and people struggled to maintain their hard-won assets and life-achievements. The wider socio-economic restructurings that the crisis brought altered people’s approach to labor in general, and entrepreneurialism in particular as the premises of modernity and liberal capitalism were challenged.

The culture of entrepreneurialism that has been cultivated since the 1980s as a grassroots economic model to achieve prosperity, included – above all – one’s will to work hard. However, hard work ceased to be a prerequisite for success in the aftermath of harsh austerity policies. The vast increase in taxation on income from entrepreneurial activities has made the survival of small businesses impossible. Self-employed entrepreneurs had to prepay their annual taxes (based on the previous year’s turnover) and attribute twenty-four percent of their profits to the state. As a result, a business that generated an annual profit of 25,000 euros from the sale of goods and/or services, could not be sustainable. During the crisis years, the retail sector in provincial cities was penetrated by large multinational firms that were able to operate in economies of scale and sell products with smaller profit margins. Moreover, the penetration of the internet into everyday life changed the way people accessed markets and acquired information. Due to the internet, local retail businesses faced harsh market competition that jumped from local to national and international scales. Online nation-wide price comparison platforms changed market rules, and many small local
shops could not keep up with the free-market economy, the increased taxation, and neoliberal capital accumulation patterns, which only large firms could take advantage of.

According to the neoliberal doctrine of “survival of the fittest,” small firms that could not survive should be creatively destroyed in order to make way for large multinational corporations to absorb their market share. Small enterprises had either to try to scale up their outreach and upgrade their operations, cut down on costs in order to have the potential of becoming sustainable, or close. However, many self-employed shop-owners adopted a stance of waiting for the crisis to pass. Running a business supplied a cash flow and enabled people to access and circulate money at the local level. The neoliberal entrepreneur, the ideotype of the individual who is creative, innovative and makes use of technology to scale up and expand business outreach, could not be emulated on the grounds of austerity. As a small shop-owner commented: “When people have no money to spend, how do they (the government/state) claim to support small business? By offering low-interest loans to renovate my shop? What difference would that make if my customers are penniless?”.

The local entrepreneurial culture was inspired by autonomy and self-reliance towards achieving a better life and did not include a constant, never-ending process of becoming richer and richer. Notions of the liberal capitalist model that was dominant until the crisis were understood by ordinary people as a method to improve their living conditions, not as a path to becoming absolute leaders in a Schumpeterian definition of entrepreneurship. They wanted to offer their children a better future and a better life than their own. In the wake of the recent austerity crisis, ordinary peoples’ hopes and dreams towards prosperity through hard work were crushed. In addition, people felt helpless and unable to affect policies that were conducted at the higher scale of political and financial power, which affected grassroots economies. Therefore, the austerity crisis, above all has been a cultural shock to people who harnessed and were accustomed to the economic processes of liberal capitalism and the premises of modernity, which in the Greek case, were produced together. The Greek national culture of entrepreneurship, as it has been constructed since the 1950s, responded to immediate struggles of the Greek labor force that sought to improve their living conditions and move up the social ladder by engaging in labor intensive activities.

After the austerity restructurings that were implemented through three memoranda agreements, in 2010, 2012 and 2015, the working middle classes in Greece lost about half of their income, while taxation on lower incomes has soared and increased cumulatively by 337 percent. The established patterns of making a livelihood in Chalkida in the industrial, construction or commercial sectors became impossible. New entrepreneurial incentives were unappealing given the widespread uncertainty. The local market of Chalkida was swept by large multinational chains, which profited from economies of scale and had the capacity to sell cheap to cash stamped consumers. Moreover, household and business loans that could not be sustained led many business owners to be excluded from the banking system, making cash the only method to receive payments. This economic strangulation and the systemic exclusion of many self-employed who had become indebted continued after the Greek referendum in June 2015. Greek people were asked to vote if they agreed or not to the bailout plan that Greece’s creditors (IMF, ECB and EU) suggested. As soon as the referendum was declared, many saw the threat of an imminent Grexit and in order to avoid a bank-run,
capital controls were imposed. Since then, e-payments through the banking system have radically increased in popularity and businesses have been obliged to possess points of sale (POS) machines that the banks issued and charged high commissions for their service.

Gendered reversals: the female breadwinner

Despite lay-offs and other new hardships, female-owned ventures could still provide a cash income to many households. The majority of laid-off cement factory workers were aged 40-55, which meant that they had already managed to build a livelihood and establish a safety net. They had at least secured their family’s means of reproduction by owning a house. They had also pursued entrepreneurial projects, using their relatively high and stable salaries as a financial base for investment. They had done so usually by founding and financially supporting firms registered in their wives' names; and, since the 2000s, in their children’s names. These people, even though they were attached to what we might call an industrial lifestyle and culture, did not consider themselves traditional proletarians in the Marxist sense. That was a point of distinguishing themselves from their colleagues who had not “tried” to develop entrepreneurial activity. Through the life histories of industrial workers and their households’ economic activities, it became apparent that industrial labor income was in many instances used as a basis for funding other livelihood projects through investments in people and in assets. Industrial laborers, especially those who had in the past experienced extreme resource scarcity, did not, simply, receive a salary and grow complacent. On the contrary, they sought to maximize their income's potential by formulating or engaging in entrepreneurial activities through their household.

When the factory stopped operating, they put their efforts into supporting the household-based ventures that their wives or children owned. Giannis, a forty-seven-year-old cement factory worker, and his wife Katerina, a forty-five-year-old business owner, had recently managed to repay their mortgage. They had two daughters aged fourteen and eleven in 2016, when I interviewed them at their household. Katerina owned a foreign language school and when Giannis was laid-off, he instantly did whatever possible to support his wife’s venture. That is how he described his experience of losing his job: “At first I panicked, then I got angry. I am still furious about what happened. At least my wife’s business goes well, so I have done whatever possible to support her. From taking up more responsibilities at home, to formulating business strategies to attract more students.” In this household arrangement, a gendered reversal of the male breadwinner model occurred after Giannis was laid-off. It is the man of the house that nowadays appears as a helping hand in female-owned businesses. This is so even for men whose wives were not working at the time of the factory closures! For example, Giorgos, fifty-three, reported that his wife used to work as an accountant, but as Giorgos could earn more than her by working overtime at the factory, they decided that she should quit her job and dedicate her time to the household. The closure of the factory left this household without an income; they managed to get by with their savings and the unemployment benefit Giorgos was entitled after being officially laid off in 2015. A year later, when his unemployment benefit ended, he subcontracted a kiosk and worked there with a former colleague of his. He elaborated: “I had to do something. You see, we registered the business in our wives' names.”
Intergenerational livelihood projects

Vangelis, 59, who worked at the kiosk where I bought tobacco, was also a cement factory worker. I ran into him, accidentally, at one of the gatherings organized by the laid-off cement factory workers. He started working at the factory at a young age and managed to become an expert in the maintenance of the factory’s machinery. He used to earn a relatively high salary thanks to his skills and years of experience. He explained that even before getting fired, he was working informally at the kiosk business he had opened and registered in his son’s name in 2003 while his son was a university student. “I opened it in his name, but I was running it,” he said. He also opened a clothes shop in his wife’s name during the same period, which they had to close due to the crisis as people started spending less and less on clothing. The loss of his status as a cement factory worker was compensated by his entrepreneurial incentives, and he often switched identities in the way he explained his economic life, although he was not formally registered as an entrepreneur. “I made two shops while I was working here,” he said, taking pride in his achievements. The phrasing that he used suggests that he regarded the salary he was able to secure as a passive mode of earning an income, which he managed to transform into capital thanks to his entrepreneurial acumen. In his conceptualization, entrepreneurialism was understood as an active form of making money. “The clothes business has been very profitable, yet, we had to close it in 2014. Too much effort for nothing, while expenses were running. We used to sell high end, expensive pieces of clothing. Now everyone buys the cheap stuff.” He framed the closure of his wife’s shop as a calculated move and stressed that he was something more than an employee at the factory, a man who had a vision and sought the means to make that vision reality, not only for himself, but for the benefit of his family. “The other business cannot fail. Kiosks will always have customers,” he informed me, not hiding, though, his disappointment with the current situation. “With the crisis, we had to adapt our expectations. I try to stay positive, but you know, I can’t always be like that,” he added, unable to hide his frustration and disappointment.

Antonis, age sixty-five, and Matina, fifty-seven, had three children: Alexis, Dimitris and Konstantina. Between 2015 and 2016, only Alexis, age thirty-six, had managed to form a household of his own. Dimitris and Konstantina, at thirty-four and thirty-two, still resided at their parents’ house and contributed to their household expenses. Antonis, a cement factory pensioner, took advantage of the factory’s early retirement schemes and voluntarily left two years early in 2007. He had received a severance pay of 90,000 euros, for which reason he had not kept up good relationships with the rest of the cement factory workers who were laid off a few years later. In 2008, Matina and Antonis’s two sons decided to open an internet café. They got a business loan of 40,000 euros using their parents’ house as collateral. The first three years had been successful, and they had nominally employed their father for it to appear that he was paying national insurance contributions which would entitle him to a full pension in 2009. Their father kept the shop’s books since he was skilled at accounting and very knowledgeable about economics and, as Dimitris informed me, he was the one who managed their household economics and kept track of their financial situation. Their venture was going well; in 2011, however, the internet café’s annual income started to drop. “We saw that the situation was turning for the worse, so we rushed to close the business down. We saw it coming. We repaid the outstanding 4,000 euros using our
father’s money and parted each our own ways. I went to London to work and study, my brother sought to become an IT teacher at the public schools,” said Dimitris, a graphic designer, who returned from London in 2014 and was underemployed at one of Chalkida’s bars, struggling with depression.

Meanwhile, Matina had owned a children clothes shop for twenty-seven years. She explained that her firm was part of the household’s project towards prosperity and their effort to provide for their three children. “Our main concern was to build a house. ‘How are we going to do that?’ I asked Antonis, and we came up with a plan.” They took that decision when their youngest daughter was old enough to attend kindergarten back in 1988 and could split child rearing with her husband while she worked and vice versa. “My children grew up here, in the shop,” she said, to stress that she had spent so many hours there. Her husband, as she said, “was helping me both at the shop and at home.” The word framing that Matina used shows that despite her status as a business owner, reproductive labor at the household level continued to be the main responsibility of working women. For her, the present economic crisis came as something unforeseen and was often considered a lie. “They did all this, and now they want us to pay for a crisis they created,” implying that there was a plan to exterminate small businesses like hers. She elaborated that her annual gross turnover before the crisis sometimes exceeded 100,000 euros, while today that amount has fallen below 40,000 euros. “You know, all the famous brands and their merchants begged us to sell their products. Chalkida used to be a wealthy city thanks to the industries. People had lots of money to spend.” She recalled an incident that had circulated in the local gossip back in 1999 when Greece still had its national currency, the drachma.

Yes, people might have spent their money on silly stuff, for instance everyone in Chalkida was talking about a cement factory worker who went to the supermarket and made a bill of a million drachmas! However, it was his hard-earned money. If some people got loans and squandered their money on vacations and luxury, the bank will seize their assets. [But] You tell me what happens when the banks go bankrupt? We, the people, always pay the bill!

Matina was unable to meet all her monthly obligations and therefore prioritized her monthly payments as a business owner. First, she covered her bank cheques with her suppliers, then she paid the electricity and telephone bills and the monthly shop rent. Last in her priorities were the fees to her Social Security Fund (OAEE), which constituted a fixed amount of money the self-employed were obliged to pay on a bimonthly basis. These fees were calculated regardless of their actual income and each actively registered self-employed person had to pay ad-hoc. In 2015, these fees, which gave one the right to access public healthcare and pensions, amounted to nearly 900 euros every two months. Matina had been unable to pay since 2012 and had accumulated a large debt (around 20,000 euros in 2016). Because of this she did not have health insurance, yet as part of her overall debt, healthcare fees were still calculated.

**Agricultural entrepreneurialism**

Another common practice among the cement factory workers who lived in rural areas was to invest in agricultural activities. Sotiris, fifty, another laid-off cement factory worker, decided to create a small wine production unit and upgrade the vineyards he
had inherited. He had worked at the cement factory since he was sixteen and was specialized in welding, a middle-ranking post. He used to earn around two thousand euros. “I am not only a worker [ergatis],” he said, “I am a boss too, I hire people.” He explained that throughout the year he employed agricultural laborers on a seasonal basis to work in his olive groves and vineyards. Shortly after he was fired, he started subcontracting the harvest and maintenance of olive groves owned by older pensioners and, along with a cousin, invested in buying agricultural machinery and equipment necessary for their venture. Sotiris lived in Vathi, a small town near the cement factory’s industrial zone, an area which has long been known for its vineyards even after the industrialization of the surrounding areas. As he elaborated: “In order to make profit and maintain such a business you have to produce a lot [of wine]. I am a small producer, so I sell some of my wine to a big bottling company, and the rest I channel it sti zoula [in covert ways/informally] through my social networks, mostly at local taverns.”

42 Industrial employment was once the driving force that transformed the peasantry into waged laborers. Now, in some cases, industrial unemployment has sent people “back to the land” for their main income activity. In another case, a factory worker had started to develop animal breeding and dairy production units before the factory’s closure. After the closure, he started to employ laid-off colleagues while supplying free meat and dairy products to his colleagues’ families who were in need. All the laid-off workers supported his venture, shopped at his store and promoted his products. “Food is a must, you cannot fail if you are a food producer,” he said in a group interview and urged others to follow his lead and become food producers: “Learn how to produce food, this is the way out [of crisis].” Another factory worker, who got fired a year before being able to retire, lived in a nearby village where he owned and maintained with his wife a small animal breeding production unit. Before securing a job at the factory, he was a shepherd in his home village. “I found a job at the factory fifteen years ago; I was forty-five back then. I have always been a shepherd and I have never stopped being one. My wife took the lead and continued our profession and now I am helping her out in our farm.” The way he framed his household’s economic activity avoided identifying himself as an entrepreneur. It was his wife that was the manager of their business. “My wife takes care of what needs to be done. I just work there, I do not bother with sales, suppliers, workers. I only work.”

Being your own boss: grassroots meanings and practices of entrepreneurialism

43 Industrial workers who had opted out to become autonomous have been another common instance. Kostas, fifty-five, was a commercial retailer of cleaning appliances, and he also offered cleaning services to industrial facilities. For the cleaning services his company offered, he employed, on demand, nearly twenty workers. He had started as a subcontracted engineer at the cement factory and later he became fully employed in the Greek Aeronautics Industry (EAB). In 1995, he decided to change occupation. “I wanted to be on my own, I did not like to follow orders.” For him, owning his own business was a major step forward, as it improved his social status. EAB was a public company in which he had a permanent job position: “My friends were all like ‘Are you crazy! Are you really going to quit?’” At first, he worked two jobs simultaneously, keeping the one in the factory that provided capital, while at the same time setting up
his venture and repaying the loans he had taken out to invest in machinery and the private venue which he had bought in 2000. He made use of his contacts in the industrial sector and quickly managed to develop a clientele of several factories in and around Chalkida.

The above case is a successful business venture which, despite the crisis, managed to maintain some of its profits. While Kostas had lost some of his regular clients by the sharp closure of factories in Chalkida, he maintained other industrial clients in the neighboring industrial zone of Oinofyta-Tanagra-Schimatari. This enabled him to sustain his business and not become indebted to his insurance fund. However, he had a business loan which had to be restructured in accordance with his creditors. For this reason, he had to reduce the working hours of four of his employees at the shop-floor and negotiate salary reductions with them. In the end, two had voluntarily decided to quit after their contract became part-time, and he kept the other two on full-time but at reduced pay.

A similar notion can be found in the entrepreneurial incentives of Theofilos, as mentioned in the first part of this article. Theofilos had founded his own construction firm in 1990 and then a shop for construction materials. He explained his decisions: “I wanted to have my own work at my own hands,” he explained, “the more you worked the more you earned, that was how the situation used to be.” His wife owned a land plot and they decided to build a house that was intended to be his daughter’s dowry. In the meantime, they had rented the property and then sold it for four times the initial cost a year before the outburst of the crisis. In 2004, Theofilos got a bad knee and decided to stop the construction business where he was actively engaged both as a manager and as a manual laborer. He bought a taxi license which he sold in 2012 when the demand for taxi services was very low as the crisis deepened. Thus, he decided to stop any professional activity and get by on the money he got from the sale of the taxi license and to wait four years until his retirement. As he told me, he had accumulated the necessary working stamps needed for retirement, yet with the pension system restructuring he could not retire before the age of 62. He finally managed to get his pension in 2016, but it was only two-thirds of what he had anticipated that he would receive (instead of 1,400 euros he received only 950 euros). Theofilos’s household was structured around the male breadwinner model. In the way he framed it, he was responsible for making money and his wife was responsible for managing it. Theofilos elaborated in one of our talks, about the impact of crisis on labor: “In the past, work was at your hands... You worked and you got paid... Nowadays, work is not at your hands.” This connects with the local understandings of entrepreneurialism, as the Greek term epicheirisi suggests – to have something at your hand and to be able to direct it at your will.

The expression that Theofilos used to describe labor as “being at your hands,” has a strong connotation of the local understandings of entrepreneurialism. As Narotzky points out, the concept of labor in the English-speaking world is problematic when it is applied in different social and cultural contexts. The same can be argued for “entrepreneurialism” and its emic understandings. Throughout my ethnographic data, industrial laborers approached waged labor income through the entrepreneurial logic. Theofilos switched jobs until he managed to found his own firm and become autonomous. Other people channeled their salaries into investments and transformed their income into capital. The Greek notion of entrepreneurialism is tied with the
notions of being autonomous and self-reliant; it is to be active instead of passively receiving a salary and being exploited.

Conclusion

In this article, I examined the relationship between industrial labor income and entrepreneurial activities by focusing on intra- and inter-household relationships and transformations since the 1950s. I investigated how industrial labor and entrepreneurial initiatives have been co-existent and often stem from the same economic culture that drives people’s aspirations towards livelihood improvement and social mobility in capitalist economies. In my research in the city of Chalkida, I found a strong correlation between male industrial labor income and female entrepreneurial initiatives. Household-based ventures were part of greater household planning. Industrial laborers had invested money to create jobs for their wives and children in their effort to improve their livelihood conditions with an intergenerational scope. Households of former industrial laborers had facilitated an organizational shift to accommodate the new realities that the austerity crisis had brought and modified their boundaries accordingly. Unemployed men appeared as a helping hand to female businesses, while women became the main income earners. Moreover, grassroots entrepreneurial efforts had ceased to be a strategy towards upward mobility. The austerity crisis and the vast contraction of income resources forced households to adjust their needs and focus their activities on social reproduction patterns to endure the crisis. During the recent economic crisis in Greece, households which incorporated diversely situated activities were easier to adapt to the austerity crisis and have proven to be more resilient.

Household-based ventures offered access to the economy and provided both income and labor resources, yet this diversification of class locations among household members who accessed the economy through different labor sectors created a vague notion of belonging to the middle class. The presence of heavy industry in Chalkida had determined grassroots models of economic development and guided people’s economic practices by shaping household projects to adapt to the income opportunities of the regional economy. The local labor sector could not accommodate the full labor force of women hence, self-employed businesses offered an alternative for unemployed women to access the labor market through “entrepreneurialization.” The foundation of business ventures was funded by industrial labor income, a household investment that created a transferable and independent income creating activity.

As a result, the grassroots practice and meaning of entrepreneurialism was linked with autonomy. Responsibility for deciding the fate of the “firm” had the members of the household that were actively involved in it, and they had the final say. “Being your own boss” meant that business owners could determine their own fate and, therefore, avoid being completely under the control of an alien, external power. Entrepreneurship entailed a certain level of freedom and was informed with aspirations of livelihood improvement and social mobility. The main quality that characterizes an enterprise in Greek culture is the fact that it is managed by the one who owns it. It is in “one’s own hands” as the emic term epicheirisi (enterprise) suggests. This notion varies from top-down definitions and discourses on entrepreneurialism which stem from the neoliberal
model of economic development which grandly ignores real life conditions and real-world needs.

NOTES


14. Ibid.
15. PIZANIAS Petros, Οι φτωχοί των πόλεων [The Poor in the Cities], Athens, Themelio, 1993.
16. Olive groves and vineyards were the most common cash crop which did not demand labor intensive care throughout the year.
21. The antiparochi system was enabled by the 1929 Law of Horizontal Ownership, which enabled an owner to divide a property into more self-sufficient and independent properties, while retaining a certain co-ownership percentage on the original plot and on any common parts of new buildings on the plot. It was used extensively to reconstruct buildings demolished in the Second World War before being used to address the housing shortages described above. This practice had extended to include all types of buildings that occupied a plot in the Greek city centers. The intensification of antiparochi during the Junta regime led to creatively destroy not only humble houses that occupied a space in the Greek city centers, but also bourgeois neoclassical architectural marvels of late 19th century, as their owners strove to maximize their wealth (see BREMMAN Marshall, All That Is Solid Melts into Air: The Experience of Modernity, New York, Simon and Schuster, 1981).
25. ALLEN et al., Housing and Welfare in Southern Europe, op. cit.
28. When I looked in the yellow pages, I was struck by the fact that many construction firms were registered under a female name.
29. I met very few women who received a pension. Most retirees were above the age of sixty-two, but women in this age range generally had experienced little formal employment and were therefore not entitled to receive a pension.
32. Sample cost in 2015-2016 taxable period for a 25-year-old business that made 25,000 euros gross profit from the sale of goods and/or services: 1) insurance fees: ~6,000 euros; 2) taxation: 24% on profit; 3) utility costs. After deducting taxes and social insurance fees the amount that remains to cover utility costs and salaries is around 12,500 euros. Rents for commercial venues in Chalkida’s commercial streets started at 400 euros. Annually that amount equals 4,800 euros. In that arrangement, a self-employed person would work many more hours than a salaried employee and earn nearly 800 euros per month, a little more than the lowest salary of an unskilled laborer.


37. The latter was a common household strategy towards ensuring the social reproduction of the future generation, given that Greece has historically had one of the highest rates of youth unemployment in the EU.

38. Epicheirisi translates as “enterprise”. It is derived from the verb epicheiro (to have something in/on/at your hands) which is equivalent to the English verb “to try.”

39. In Greece, first degree relatives are allowed to work in family businesses without being registered as employees.

40. She calculated a net profit income of 25,000 to 35,000 euros before 2010. During the economic crisis, she could barely reach 10,000 euros and could not cover utility costs, income taxes and social insurance fees.

41. 3,000 euros.


43. See also RAKOPOULOS Theodoros, “Wage is male – but land is a woman,” in Theodoros Rakopoulos, From Clans to Co-Ops: Confiscated Mafia Land in Sicily, New York, Berghahn Books, 2018, p. 141-158.

44. I have interviewed both him and his wife and they agreed that it cost them some 35,000 euros. Theofilos’s personal work hours were not counted by either.

45. A taxi license in 2002 would have cost around 100,000 euros; it was considered to be a fast-yielding investment protected by the state. He sold it for 60,000 euros.

46. NAROTZKY, “Rethinking the Concept of Labor,” art. cit.
In this article, I examine the household-based ventures of industrial laborers in the context of the recent economic crisis, in Chalkida, Greece, a mid-sized post-industrial city where I conducted fieldwork from April 2015 to December 2016. I investigate grassroots economic projects and meanings of entrepreneurialism. I focus my analysis on the household scale by bringing together political economy, history and ethnography. I assess the impact of austerity crisis on social reproduction practices and household organization of former industrial laborers who engaged in entrepreneurial projects. The recent economic crisis has reconstituted extended family resource pooling units, enhanced intergenerational dependencies and produced gendered reversals in households where unemployed males started to appear as the “helping hand” to female-owned businesses.

Cet article s’intéresse aux entreprises familiales d’ouvriers de l’industrie dans le contexte de la récente crise économique grecque à Chalkida, une ville post-industrielle de taille moyenne où j’ai effectué un travail de terrain d’avril 2015 à décembre 2016. J’étudie plus précisément les projets économiques issus de la base et les diverses significations de l’entrepreneuriat. Mon analyse se situe au niveau des ménages, que j’aborde par le prisme conjoint de l’économie politique, de l’histoire et de l’ethnographie. J’évalue les effets de la crise d’austérité sur les pratiques de reproduction sociale et sur l’organisation des ménages d’anciens ouvriers de l’industrie qui se sont engagés dans des projets entrepreneuriaux. La récente crise économique a conduit à la reconstitution de familles élargies qui mettent en commun leurs ressources et à des dépendances intergénérationnelles accrues, mais également à un renversement des rôles genrés dans certains ménages où des hommes au chômage ont commencé à prêter main forte aux entreprises détenues par des femmes.

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