



Dynamics of Virtual Work

Working Paper Series

Number 7

Living in 'Beta': hubs, collectives and the emergence of moral economies in Athens

by Antigoni Papageorgiou

The Dynamics of Virtual Work

COST Action IS 1202, *The Dynamics of Virtual Work*, is an international interdisciplinary research network on the transformation of work in the Internet Age, supported by COST (European Co-operation in Science and Technology) within the Individuals, Societies, Cultures and Health Domain. Chaired by Ursula Huws, Professor of Labour and Globalisation at the University of Hertfordshire in the UK, the Action is managed by a committee of representatives from 30 participating COST countries. Further information about the Action can be found at

http://www.cost.eu/domains_actions/isch/Actions/IS1202.

ICTs have had a major impact on the content and location of work. Digitisation of information has transformed labour processes whilst telecommunications have enabled jobs to be relocated globally. But ICTs have also enabled the creation of entirely new types of 'digital' or 'virtual' labour, both paid and unpaid, shifting the borderline between 'play' and 'work' and creating new types of unpaid labour connected with consumption and co-creation of services. This affects private life as well as transforming the nature of work. Because of the gender division of labour, this affects women and men differently.

The changing geography of virtual work and the emergence of new value-generating virtual activities have major implications for economic development, skills and innovation policies. However these are poorly understood because they have been studied in a highly fragmentary way by isolated researchers.

This Action will distil knowledge to enable policymakers to separate facts from hype and develop effective strategies to generate new employment and economic development in Europe. It will bring together experts in the fields of communications, innovation, management, digital media, creative industries, technology, employment, economics, sociology, geography, gender studies and cultural studies to consolidate theory, map this emerging field, support early stage researchers and develop new research agendas.

This Working Paper is one of a series published by the Action in pursuit of these aims.

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Living in ‘Beta’¹: hubs, collectives and the emergence of moral economies in Athens

Antigoni Papageorgiou

Abstract

This research aims to explore young people’s experiences of working at creative collaborative spaces, such as creative hubs, incubators, accelerators and co-working spaces. Through this exploration, it wishes to go beyond widespread assumptions of co-working as ‘philosophy’ or ‘movement’, and instead it focuses on revealing the contradictory dynamics regarding the construction of their entrepreneurial, gendered and moral selves.

11 semi-structured interviews were carried out with users of creative collaborative spaces; this sample is constituted by a mix of founders of new business ventures who at that moment the majority of them were enrolled in MBAs or Master Degrees while some of them were also working as freelancers in other start-ups. These young professionals operated between creativity and market, working at the boundaries of different working practices. A wide range of different occupations were included such as designers, product managers, architects, content providers, developers and marketing consultants. Since all the participants operate in the grey area between self-employment and paid employment, it must be noted that all the working statutes are extremely fluid and subject to constant change.

6 managers/ founders of creative collaborative spaces which operate under different models of governance (‘top-down’ and ‘bottom-up’) in the city centre were interviewed, as well as a serial entrepreneur who was acting as an Angel Investor and Venture Capitalist.

Besides their extremely precarious working conditions, users and founders of the creative hubs were quite optimistic about the future and extremely satisfied with what they were doing and how they were doing it. The answer to that is threefold. Firstly, this is related to the emerging discourse of being in love with your work in order to prove that you are committed, ambitious and professional. They are demanded to develop a deep emotional attachment with their work (Gregg, 2010). Notwithstanding, people were passionate about their work because of its creative potential which enables opportunities for autonomy (‘being your own boss’), entrepreneurship, innovation, as well as its moral advantage towards more traditional corporate practices. The latter was repeatedly considered as ‘naïf’ by the participants of this research. Last but not least, in conditions of constant crisis, young workers kept their work-life expectations very low regarding the money they were earning as well as their working and living conditions, since very few of them have access to insurance, benefits and pension schemes. The right to a fulfilling and meaningful work has been highly perceived as luxury due to the high rates of unemployment especially to young populations.

¹ In the start-up world, ‘beta’ is the shorthand for the process of quickly and efficiently pressure testing a product or an idea. Put a minimum viable product out into the market, test it on real customers, and either adapt or double down depending on how hypotheses are validated, or not. Same approach in life & work as well.

Creative entrepreneurs along with their satisfaction from their job, they are bringing to the economic activity a different 'ethos'. This ethos has been revolving around the - superficially-radical discourse of 'disruption'. 'Disruption' is being presented as the primary source of motivation to start a business venture which will in turn 'disrupt' the industry, 'disrupt' the common corporate practices and shake to the core our beliefs about business, life, happiness, and indeed the world as we know it.

Within this ambiguous 'disruption discourse' there has been an immanent attempt to re- moralize economic activity in a competitive working environment where free market's values are dominant. Young employees found themselves in this highly contradictory situation where they are asked to prove their 'selective' morality, while the hard-core neoliberal rationales of competition and individual potential are being constantly reproduced. Therefore, 'disruption discourse' which is based on a creative collaborative ethos is being articulated paradoxically within the imperative of an entrepreneurial competitiveness.

A women's leadership gap was identified, since only four interviewees were women. This finding indicates that gendered roles keep imprinting social practices within workplaces. Especially, in fields such as technology, or fin- tech, women are subjected to high expectations in order to prove that they are equally technologically qualified within extremely laddish environments where everybody is a geek or a techie.

All the participants were highly tempted by success stories of – mostly Silicon Valley based- start-ups. These narratives kept cultivating a micro-celebrity discourse around people who are engaged into the creative ecosystem, as well as maintaining a myth that success is yet to come and independent from materiality.

Introduction

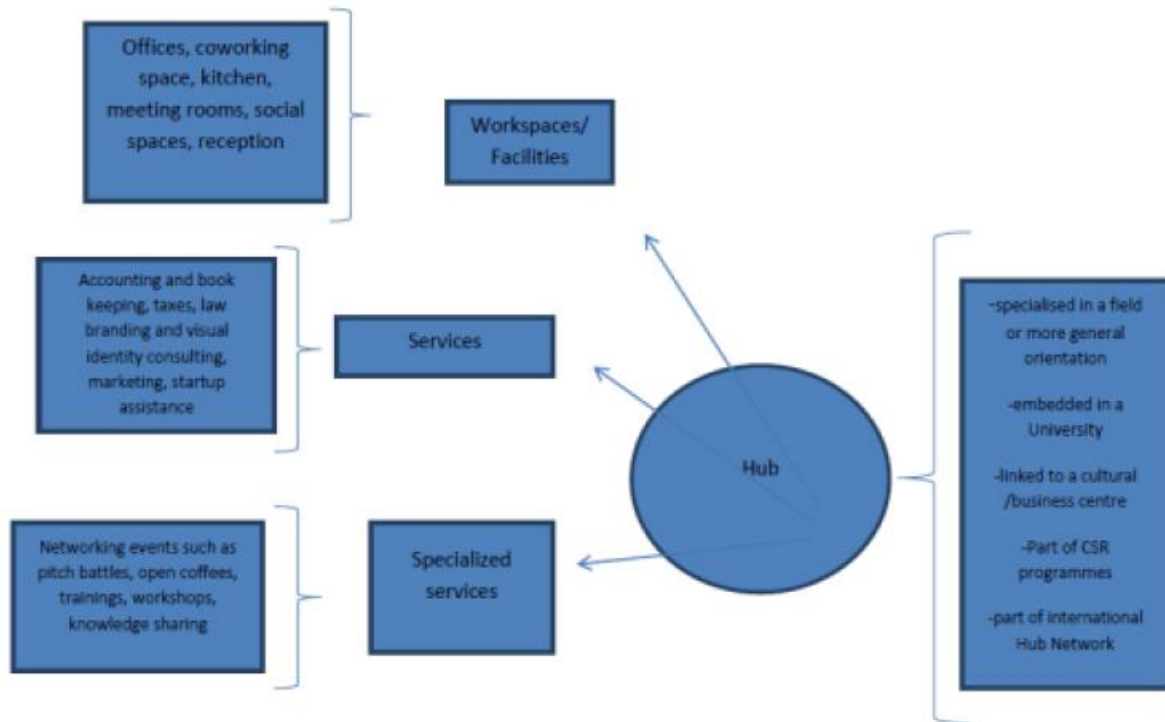


Figure 1 Hub mind map

What are all these hubs, co-working spaces, incubators and accelerators which have been mushrooming the city centre of Athens over the last few years? What kind of methodological tools should we use in order to understand how these spaces operate? Who are the people engaging in this debate and what motivates them to do so? What are the core values that have been promoted within spaces? What are the labor practices and the professional identities that likely emerge and be endorsed within these flexible workplaces? These are some of the questions this report wants to address, as it aims to capture a significant turn of young people to more flexible workplaces. This turn has taken place in the context of the EU's deepening sovereign debt crisis having Athens as its epicenter.

The creative sector in Greece has been steadily expanding since the beginning of the sovereign debt crisis in 2008, at the same time as opportunities for stable employment, especially for young, educated people who enter the labor market for the first time have been decreasing. Since fixed workplaces in the creative sector hardly exist, flexible forms of work organization have experienced a significant growth. The expansion of creative hubs is willing to bridge the gap created by the lack of fixed workplaces primarily in the creative sector, but also in a wide range of occupational fields. This is related to the decline of middle-class jobs and it also signifies the penetration of creative practices into fields traditionally associated with more conventional and corporate environments such as finance or IT. As dePeuter observes, coworking responds to two manifestations of precarity: 1) the isolation of working alone at home and 2) the lack of access to affordable commercial property (de Peuter, 2014, p.269). As Capdevila has shown in his study, coworking spaces are places where micro businesses and freelancers coexist (CAPDEVILA, 2015).

Under the term hub, a wide variety of spaces operate such as coworking spaces, hacker spaces, labs, incubators, accelerators, each of them providing a wide array of services to freelancers and newly

founded businesses known as startups. Defining hubs has been proved so far quite challenging, since it is a relatively new phenomenon operating with a blurry organizational structure. The current literature address this topic in terms of the rise of non-standard employment and the demand for “third work-places” as well as in terms of dynamics of innovation outside of firms within the cities (Gandini, 2015; CAPDEVILA, 2015), while few scholars research their organizational models and professional identities that appear in these spaces (Bergek and Norrman, 2008; Chambers and Vejle, 2011; de Peuter, 2014).

A hub can vary in terms of its model of governance, its philosophy and goal as well as its array of providing services. Hubs can be stand-alone social enterprises, private ventures or owned by authorities such as embassies, the Municipality and being embedded in Universities or in centres for Business or even in Banks as part of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) programmes. This determines their goals and public profile significantly. In order to sustain the spaces different sources of funding are being combined. The private initiatives are mostly funded through private capitals or/and partly through private foundations, while public ones are funded through EU structural funds.

The first hub was founded in Athens in 2009 by two aspiring entrepreneurs who met during a start-up weekend powered by Microsoft in Greece. Inspired by the Microsoft meetup, they decided to run the first coworking space near Sydagma Square. During that time, the first warning signs of distress that a meltdown was looming had already become prevalent in Athens. Almost seven years later, Athens (May 2016) counts more than fifteen hubs initiated primarily by the private sector aiming to tackle unemployment and the brain drain.

The public sector and more precisely, the Municipality of Athens launched a series of infrastructures in order to support the blooming creative collaborative ecosystem, as part of the “Athens Project”² development initiative. These public policies aim to boost competition, flexibility and managerialism among the ecosystem and nurture ‘responsible individuals’ aiming to take their fate into their hands (Dey and Steyaert, 2016).

The “Athens Project”, which marked the turn towards “the entrepreneurial city” for the Municipality of Athens, took place in 2012 when there has been an oversupply of hubs. At that time, a lot of private spaces were struggling to survive while some of them decided to close due to financial difficulties that they are facing. These public initiatives were highly criticized due to their extremely high budget in times of massive public sector cuts. In addition to that, these public initiatives were perceived by the creative collaborative ecosystem as an unnecessary, belated, involvement of the public sector in a field traditionally related to the private initiative.

² The “Athens Project” is a growth plan, aimed at transforming Athens into a modern European metropolis. This project includes a large number of multi-level projects and programmes, divided into four axes, including the Improvement of Competitiveness and Entrepreneurship. More specifically, this axis aims at enhancing key sectors of the local economy that promote innovation and competitiveness, thus supporting employment, mainly of young people. Moreover, it provides for the utilization of key infrastructures in the centre of Athens (renovation and reconstruction of buildings), with the aim of turning them into hotbeds of entrepreneurship, focused on new technologies. Further actions have also been planned in regard to the tourist development and promotion of Athens, based on conference tourism and “City Breaks”.



Figure 2 Semi-public/ public initiatives

This late turn towards start-up entrepreneurialism happened when there was already a wide discussion within the creative collaborative ecosystem about how value is being created within the creative hubs. Some of the participants were quite skeptical about their involvement in these spaces as they were questioning some of the offering such as mentoring programs and coaching. The majority, though, tended to agree that to be based in creative hubs gives visibility to participants, access to various networks such as companies, Venture Capitalists, as well as potential associates. For that reason, hubs' founders have been trying to cultivate very carefully their collective reputation; a strong and unique brand which in turn attracts like-minded people.

From my participant observation and fieldwork notes, it seems that value has been co-created by both the services that these places provide to the users and by previous tenants' success stories which are being capitalized and concretized out as promises to the new ones. In other words, creative hubs build on the constant hunger of young creative entrepreneurs for successful survival strategies which will ensure and strengthen their position within the labor market. More precisely, creative hubs are seen as an emerging ecosystem of working practices and identities which are being conceptualized and constructed through an intricate procedure.

Aiming to analyze this complexity, I first turn my focus on hubs' structure exploring the relation between the different organizational models that hubs can have and the construction of the professional identities of young people who work there. In order to analyze the data collected during my fieldwork, several criteria have been identified regarding the size of the hubs, the organizational structure – bottom-up or top-down-, the relations with external/internal capital, the providing services, the fees, the level of difficulty and the entry requirements, as well as their public profile and fundamental values. Right after, I provide some of my first concluding remarks regarding the working and living conditions as well as the wellbeing of young entrepreneurs.

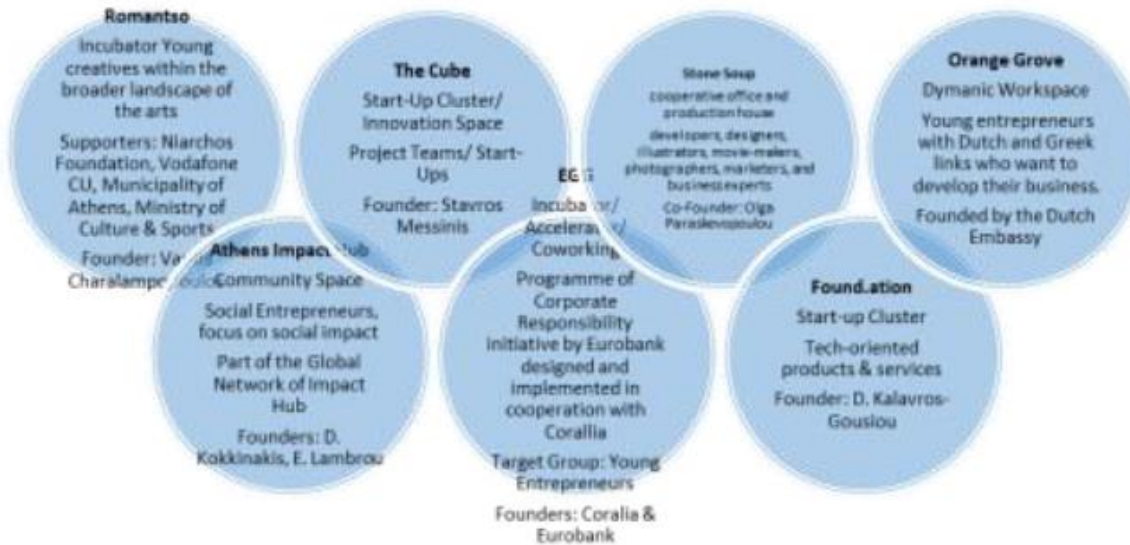


Figure 3 Private initiatives

Conducting the research: Methods and sample

The interviews were semi-structured and participants were encouraged to reflect on their educational background, their career paths, and their decision to enter to entrepreneurial world. Because I was very much interested in their own opinions and beliefs about the emerging creative ecosystem and how they position themselves within it, participants were left free to discuss about topics that they felt were important to the aforementioned core topics. All of the interviews were rather intensive - more than one hour long- conversations because of my constant demand to know and explore more the ‘you know’s’ of the participants.

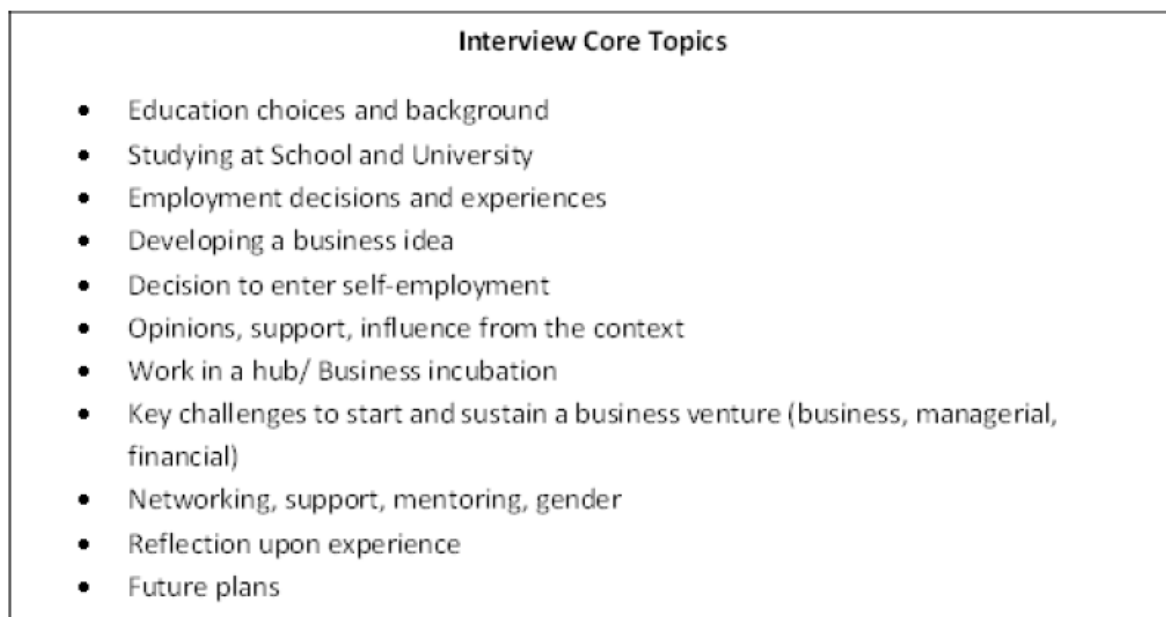


Figure 4 Interview core topics

Since my intention has been to create theory from the concrete conditions that I have found in the field, my overall research design has been informed by the grounded theory approach of

simultaneous data collection and analysis (Glaser G. and Strauss, 1967). Case study research is specifically suited to this open-ended ethos and it is even more applicable in the fields where the empirical and theoretical body of work is still developing. So, my research strategy has been in a constant dialogue with the contingency of the field and has been well- informed by the specific circumstances found there.

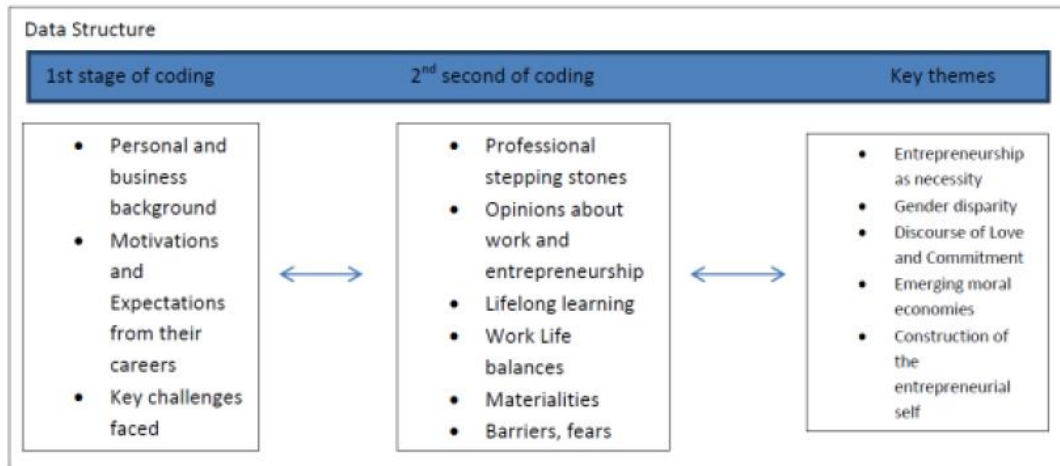


Figure 5 Data structure in progress

Inside the Hub

Dropping out of the Uni: Why would you be studying it if you could be doing it?

‘Neither me, neither my partner has gone to the Uni, and this is what we are trying to pass to our children as well, going to the Uni is not going to save you! It’s experiences of life, what you can do with them, not just a paper’
M.

“There is a general belief that a child must become a lawyer or a doctor but actually entrepreneurship is the opposite of education, is ‘doing’. Education is also important in {a foreign country}, but important is having the experience of your life, of doing it yourself.”
AM.

Since University education could not anymore guarantee a place in the job market hubs provide a space where graduates can be trained in order to obtain business experience. Being based in a hub is the one and only professional stepping stone someone could take in the times of a constant crisis. Hence, startup entrepreneurialism is represented in the participants’ mind as one step towards the labour market; not only because they give you visibility and access to various professional networks, but more precisely because you could potentially enter the market by generating your dream job. Especially for the participants who had a background in Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences, hubs provide a space where young people can be trained in order to obtain business experience and expertise and test their idea. Start-ups are being represented as the new MBAs, while participants are being encouraged to put in practice their knowledge and learn by doing.

What is significant among the start-up community, is that University education is undervalued when is being compared with the ‘true business experience’. There has been a distinction between the ‘makers’ and the ‘theorists’. The latter category is characterized by a lack of bravery of experiencing

life, while the ‘makers’ are the ones who push for a better society. The identity of the ‘makers’ sustains mythical characteristics such as exceptional talent and restless unconventional spirit. These personality components cannot be taught but are situated in an almost metaphysic sphere. Bill Gates, Steve Jobs, Mark Zuckerberg serve as role models for young entrepreneurs whose ‘disruptive’ careers keep the dream alive.

SS: Peer2Peer Learning

“So many people out there know how to code... we could contribute on that field by bringing projects from abroad. There wasn’t in our minds that our income would be from memberships, from renting the space, but from clients who pay to work on their projects. So we put some juniors next to seniors to learn”

X., 15/01/2016

SS is a cooperative office and production house in the center of Athens. It was founded in 2013 by a young entrepreneur who previously was living and working abroad. During her time abroad, she worked for a variety of new media projects as a freelancer but also as a volunteer simultaneously. After X. nurtured strong ties with new media professionals and collectives based in Europe, she decided to run her own creative collaborative space in Athens. X. got inherited the flat where SS is based and her low budget allowed her gradually to do some minor changes to transform the space into an office. Running the space, X. and her foreign co-founder have never received any financial help.

At SS a wide variety of new media professionals, developers, designers, illustrators, movie-makers, photographers, marketers, and business experts come together to work on projects, and educate each other. SS is an entry level small collaborative space which mainly emphasizes in learning process. There are no monthly fees but at the end of the month bills are being equally shared. If a member cannot pay his/her share, he/she can contribute to the community by designing a logo or providing another service needed at that time. SS is based on the “*sharing is caring*” philosophy where resources are common and subject to be distributed. Aiming to connect young people with job opportunities, SS provides a space for collaborations, internships and trainings where young people can gain first work experience. Having the process of learning at its centre of attention, SS’s philosophy is to put young workers- recent graduates- to work next seniors in order to be taught and trained.

SS’s structure shares a lot of characteristics with what Wenger has identified as Community of Practice. In a Community of Practice (CoP), shared knowledge provides a common ground for members’ participation, guides learning and give meaning to actions. The Community which is being created around the learning process, fosters interactions and the sharing of ideas. Lastly, practice provides group focus around which the community develops shares and maintains its core of knowledge (Wenger, 1998a). In this sense, learning produces a social system in which practice is the common property of the community, the value added to the system (Wenger, 1998b.) The participants of the community have strong connections with each other and identify themselves as being part of this flexible organization in the making in which there are not fixed roles and procedures. Its open emergent structure enables even more participants’ involvement and identification. Through this crucial engagement with the community, identity is being perceived as a learning trajectory.

Y., a young start-upper describes his personal story of becoming in the context of SS community: *“When I first came here {SS}, I had a very immature start-up idea. (...) I considered it brilliant back*

then, but as I gained some more experience I realized that it was a complete bullshit {P}eople here told me to join some of their teams to see how work is being done, to see the problems that we encounter, what functions, what doesn't." Learning as a collective dynamic process has changed his beliefs and his way of understanding business opportunities. In addition, through this continuous interaction and mutual mentoring with members of the community, he has curved his personality and professional identity.

Since participants are not coming across to vertical hierarchies, there has been a wide debate among researchers whether Communities of Practice (CoP) tend to overlook issues of power (Contu and Willmott, 2003). Due to their emergent structure, the complex relationships developed within them and the self-organization model that is being promoted in the CoP, the negotiation of identity and cultural meaning has been proved even more active and contested. CoP should not be considered as egalitarian structurations, but rather practice based learning environments where conflicting meanings, identities and values are being contested. Taking the cue from Alessia Contu's and Hugh Willmott's suggestion to develop the radical dimension of CoP, I focus on the importance of power relations within communities where learning is a dynamic complex process rather than a passive one (Contu and Willmott, 2003).

Within these practice based learning environments, newcomers experience informal barriers which operate as spontaneous dynamics within the community. As Y. puts it, before entering the community he had to pull his experience aside and mingle with the other participants. So, when a member brings a new element to the community, the community has to decide if it is embraced or not. It can take up quite a lot of time to convince the community to adopt it. So learning can be viewed as a process of realignment between what is socially acceptable within the community and personal experiences, each moment of learning is a moment of contestation. Within the CoP, identity is a way of talking about how learning changes who we are, a way of cultivating our working selves and experiencing the emerging world of work. It was very interesting that the participants of this research who were based at SS expressed the same beliefs and opinions – for instance, about the world of work- during the interview.

These contradictory dynamics are being articulated when a newcomer enters the community and must show his/her deep knowledge and commitment to the community's goals and values. "(...) *there will be like a competition, prove us that you are smart, otherwise you will be mocked*" says X., the founder of the community. More precisely, when women developers attempt to become part of the community they are facing multiple invisible boundaries. It is needed to perpetually justify and defend their existence by proving that they are equally- or maybe exceptionally- qualified. Even X. has never experienced any overt discrimination; she admits that at the beginning it was difficult to explain her role within the community due to her lack of IT knowledge which singled her out from her peers. As she states "*(...) Of course, developers are cocky.... But in this field, it is easier to be a woman, because they carve to find a woman. But if you are a woman developer you should have a very good knowledge of what you are doing otherwise you will end up being the woman developer who is constantly being mocked.*".

SS operates as an open learning community with almost 15 members. Under its roof, a strong brand is being built through community work. This brand is used by the young professionals who show a certain level of professionalism by being based there. This in turn has multiple ramifications, especially in terms of negotiating with clients from a more powerful position. As "SSer" explained to me, SS helps you, on the one hand, to handle clients' expectations and on the other hand, to estimate the costs and put a price on one's work. Due to the lack of any form of young new media workers' unionization, SS act as protection of young people's labour rights within the context of radical precarity. It can be argued that SS provides a collective way for freelancers and start-uppers to

manage some aspects of uncertainty. At the same time, since SS cannot afford hiring permanent staff, is “doomed” to rely on unpaid intern labour. This is an apparent contradiction and shows the limitations of collective practices when are not supported by other private or public funds.

XYZ: “In here it is not Greece, this is what we tell to people”

(M., co-founder of XYZ)

XYZ is a startup cluster and innovation space in downtown Athens with strong ties with technological institutions, private universities and Venture Capitalists. After selling their share at a coworking space, M. and X. were looking for a bigger space which could host various teams, workshops and meetings, while at the same time it could secure privacy for start-uppers and investors. The building of XYZ used to be a Stock Exchange and was closed for more than 4 years prior to its activation by the founders of XYZ. The building is constituted by an open space in the ground floor where there are shared desks and as you walk all the way up to the terrace, there are private offices and meeting rooms in this seven floor building. Even it is designed to host multiple teams, at the moment only 15 teams are based at XYZ.

XYZ’s expenses are being covered from renting the spaces, the office desks and from organizing workshops and meet-ups. Even XYZ hosts various events from coding to knitting and healthy cooking, being tech savvy serves as the only criterion to enter XYZ’s community. Aiming to cultivate an entrepreneurial identity, XYZ’s founders emphasize in learning process by informally mentoring startups. Both the founders see themselves as a *powerful glue* which engage, involve and connect different people. M. and X. use their prior valuable experience of hosting some of the most well-known startups by inspiring the new generation of entrepreneurs.

XYZ’s community is organized around the notions of risk and value while it is fostered by a common social mission. As X. tells me: “*Entrepreneurs are risk takers and value givers (...)* Entrepreneurial activity must have a social mission, otherwise is strip mining.” Their entrepreneurial philosophy is being grounded on the “now”. XYZ is connected to the everyday problems and needs of people who work at XYZ. This is what M. calls a *go with the flow* strategy, as she narrates to me two examples of this strategy. Over the last few months, XYZ space is used as a drop-off location where people can donate supplies to the refugees. Moreover, in an attempt to engage themselves in the political debate, they decided to open their space to candidates from all the political parties – besides the Golden Dawn-, who run for the first time and allow them come and run their campaigns from XYZ during last year elections.

In these challenging times, XYZ has been facing numerous difficulties and has been trying to tackle uncertainty by being always up for international collaborations and emerging opportunities. Experiencing the everyday tough Greek reality, made them absolutely cynical and hopeless. Hence, they promote their space as rather internationally connected and less attached to the Greek reality. This also draws from their personal backgrounds as both of them they grew up abroad and are bilingual. Greek bureaucracy is listed as the number one problem, while State initiatives on the entrepreneurial field are perceived as outdated and amateurs’ moves. Since they first moved to the XYZ’s building, they have been experiencing problems in terms of security and cleanness of their street. Even they had repeatedly complained to the municipality, nothing has changed so far. From their side, they organized a graffiti festival with the aim to paint some walls and make their neighborhood active and lively. Having problems with drug dealing and petty crime, they are seriously considering of moving, but before any decision taken X. has written a letter to the mayor:

“I wrote a letter to the mayor, three four months ago, after being attacked on our street and the main respondent few weeks later, saying that everybody needs to their job and people are doing their job,

and I would agree with him, and also criticize him because he is not doing his job in the sense of if he considers his job entrepreneurial activation, he hasn't come through these six why's"

X. has been very critical to public entrepreneurial initiatives. In his opinion, public initiatives proved money-consuming and they rather not help start-up community. Following X.

rationale, entrepreneurship is so connected to private sphere that any other action is condemned to fail not only due to the lack of knowledge but also due to the lack of responsibility/ authority. Another argument expressed during our interview was that, by building new infrastructure the State is like sabotaging the ones that already exist and are struggling to survive. When he was asked whether he would prefer state support in the forms of external funding, he strongly disagreed, *"Because that makes you lazy, you are not as creative when your tummy is full, you are more creative when your tummy is empty"*.

Nurturing moral subjectivities in the times of crisis

Due to state's inability to deal with social issues such as unemployment and poverty, social entrepreneurs have become increasingly visible in Athens over the last few years. Promoting an ethos of individual responsibility, initiatives have been organized such as blood donations and common meals which were seen as business opportunities and eventually evolved into new business ventures. Moreover, various forms of social entrepreneurship and ethical businesses have been boosted through the National Strategic Reference Framework funds as welfare state's withdrawal has given space to private initiatives. A culture of transferring responsibilities from the state to individuals is being cultivated, linking this emerging type of entrepreneurship with "good society" and "responsible citizens".

The strong narrative of social entrepreneurship is being constructed in a double conflicting move: On the one hand, social entrepreneurs claim to humanize economic activity, promoting social values. On the other hand, business practices are being incorporated into all aspects of their entrepreneurial activity. There has been a wide academic debate whether this marks a turn towards the re-moralization of economic activity or the deepening of neoliberal values into every aspect of social life (Heelas, 2002; Banks, 2006). Social entrepreneurship is being grounded on contradictory principles like social responsibility, pro-activeness, competition and managerialism. Ideas imported by the private sector such as impact measurement, transparency and auditing are being valued (Dey and Steyaert, 2016), while notions such as activism and solidarity traditionally associated with radical left thought tend to be embraced.

Hubs, community and shared spaces represent excellent cases in order to examine how these conflicting narratives are being incorporated and translated into everyday practices within current flexible working environments. We seek to explore how entrepreneurial moral subjectivities are being shaped and negotiate the meaning of their entrepreneurial actions. From my participatory observation, field notes and semi-structured interviews, it seems that young entrepreneurs are constantly trying to cope with a growing moral complexity as they are asked to perform a day to day "selective" morality.

The case of AI HUB

AI HUB is a downtown community place where social entrepreneurs, freelancers and artists get to meet and work together. It is located in the heart of the historical centre of Athens in an old neoclassical building designed by Ernst Ziller in 1860. There is a big common space where members can work in shared or private desks, as well as few meeting rooms. As AI HUB is part of the global

network of Impact HUB, it offers international connections, expertise and consultancy to social entrepreneurial business ventures. It hosts daily a wide variety of events, workshops, get-togethers, pitch battles and competitions aiming to become more than a bare coworking space but rather an active and diverse collaborative movement. This vibrant collaborative community is organized around a common mission: to make a social impact. Putting at the centre of attention the notion of the impact, an aspiring entrepreneurial ecosystem is continuously expanding, counting more than 80 memberships and having consulted more than 150 start-ups so far in 2016- when this research took place. Participants can easily enter community either as freelancers where they have to pay monthly fees or as a start-up where AI HUB team meets in order to examine where it could be worth providing advices. There are no fixed services, but participants are free to decide what is suitable for their business.

R. and F. co-founded AI HUB back in 2013, after they had previously worked in other European Hubs, also members of Impact HUB network. The decision of founding a HUB was taken some years earlier when they met during their graduate studies through an international youth-led network. Participating actively in this international network while they were in Greece, F. and R. gained valuable hands-on business experience in managing big projects.

Since traditional ways of political representation such as participating in political youths seemed too outdated and meaningless for them, NGOs represented a “neutral space”: *“we found a neutral space that was international (...) it was like a playground of experimentation (...) you can do whatever there, from inviting foreign speakers to doing sales”* R. mentioned to me. Through this network, they both travelled around the world and connected with people who could become potential business partners. Moreover, working on the business model of HUB before their graduation, the two young entrepreneurs showed not only deep commitment to their goal but also a strong proof of pro-activeness.

The essential part of their plan was to spend some time abroad in order to extract tacit and explicit knowledge on how to run properly a collaborative space. R. worked at another HUB for two years and a half. For the first and a half year, his internship was sponsored by his University in Athens, right after he applied for various EVS programmes and then he was in a paying position. Usually, university scholarships for European internships are up to 500 euros, while EVS provide interns with some pocket money and rent allowance. This in practice meant that for quite a while, R. was living with less than 500 euro per month. At the same time, he was feeling huge responsibility and ethical commitment to fundraise primarily to support the newly founded organization by sustaining his job position. Even R. was working for more than 12 hours and he was living in a constant uncertainty, he cherished this learning experience.

R. returned back to Athens in 2012 when there was a huge interest on collaborative spaces from the Investors’ side. At that time, both public policies had started to boost social entrepreneurship through very few municipal initiatives while private entities- such as banks- were looking to run hubs as part of their CSR programmes. The two young entrepreneurs discussed with multiple stakeholders and examined all the available options of funding. Even they had come across some opportunities to co-found AI HUB along with various partners, they refused to do so and prefer to use their limited family capital. The reason for doing that was that they strongly believed that AI HUB needed to build a strong brand without being tied to any other funding body. As R. mentioned to me they didn’t want to be overtly linked to any financial institute so any collaboration with banks and investors was turned down.

What was at stake right before the realization of HUB was its autonomy despite the financial difficulties that they were facing at that time. For these young entrepreneurs, autonomy is constituted

by a mixture of self-management and proving an independence from materialities. On their ethical path of becoming entrepreneurs, moral motives seem to be valued more and notions like “profit” and “necessity” have been replaced by the terms “sustainability” and “love”. As R. points out when he was asked about the entrepreneurial ecosystem of Athens:

“The thing is to start by having the right direction. Entrepreneurship should be driven by choice and not by necessity (...) deep inside it might exist that you have no other choice, but you should start thinking what you like, what you love (...) I think that if everybody could combine what he is good at, what he does good and to have an impact, it would be a total success.”

But this powerful narrative about ethical entrepreneurship is being continuously tested in everyday life. So, even young entrepreneurs aspire to promote themselves as independent, moral and creative subjectivities the tough economic reality influences deeply their life choices. In a moment of clarity R. tells me: “... Ah, there is so much talking on entrepreneurship, but who is gonna take the risk to start a start up? Who is eager to take the risk and not to choose a safer option? You will tell me, there is no other way... (...)”.

RPG

RPG was one of the first hubs in Athens initiated by XBank along with C. Clusters Initiative aiming to boost young entrepreneurship and fight unemployment. It was founded in March 2013 in order to provide a wide range of one stop consulting services such as accounting, book keeping, governance, marketing strategy, human resources management and copyright to newly founded businesses. In addition, RPG provides a wide network of mentors as well as boot camp training and hands on workshops in various topics in collaboration with academic institutions, Universities and experienced entrepreneurs. Besides that, RPG offers to their members the infrastructure needed in order to set up their businesses such as offices and a common space where they can interact with each other. The space is located in a former XBank branch and every team/ members have their own offices. RPG’s setup gives a sense of formality and professionalism as well as the cubicles look like company’s offices.

As part of the Corporate Social Responsibility, all RPG services are free of charge. The open call for participating at RPG is early every year and is divided into three phases: Firstly, entrepreneurs are asked to fill in an online application form by providing a concrete 8-page business plan and by following specific requirements and guidelines. Secondly, candidates are asked to pitch their idea for 5 minutes in front of a jury composed by various entrepreneurs, academics, managers, business men and CEO clubs. Feedback is given only to the first 40 participants in order to get prepared for the second pitch. Finally, these 40 participants do a supplementary 5-minute pitch again in front of the jury but only 25 of them are chosen to enter the hub.

The basic evaluating criterion is innovation in product, marketing and process. The knowledge, the skills, the experience as well as the potential of the teams are also being taken in consideration. Participants can stay in the hub for the maximum period of one year. In special cases, teams with an excellent performance are being asked to stay for an extra year or so and run an alumni residence. Within the alumni residence programme, the successful teams are requested to mentor 5 of the newcomers. This community building strategy is being employed aiming to help the transition and the acceleration of start-up ideas. Moreover, experience and learning sharing events help the community to come together and create synergies.

The community building milestone of RPG is a semi-voluntary charity event that must be organized by the participants every year. In an attempt to embrace the rationale of the Corporate Social

Responsibility programmes, participants are asked to do a 1-euro donation per day for a year to a NGO. As F. the site manager of the hub explains to me: *“(...)*This is at the strategic core of this programme, because no matter if you are a start upper or a big corporation, you are asked to have a civic engagement with the society (...)*”*. In a space funded by a for profit company and more precisely by a bank where capitalist values are being embraced and fully naturalized, young start-uppers must demonstrate that their future entrepreneurial career is designed to go beyond the profit motive. So, even the participants could benefit of the services provided by the hub for “free”, it was requested, as an exchange, to show deep ethical commitment to the Bank’s goals.

Everyday life at RPG is being tracked and fully regulated by the management team. The RPG ecosystem can be characterized as rather introvert leaving limited freedom to start-ups to choose their associates. As some participants observed during the interviews, there has been a mismatch between the providing services and what start-ups really need. RPG, as a Corporate Social Responsibility initiative, collaborates with prestigious big corporations in order to provide excellent quality services, but the latter corporations are unable to understand start-ups’ needs since they are used to deal with well-established companies.

M. described how outdated are some of the services and the problems they have encountered during their stay at RPG: *“Here {meaning RPG} services are not really successful or useful. For example, they have {name of an international company} for accounting services and {name of an advertising agency} for corporate identity. They are very good companies, but they don’t fit me at this stage, where I am. Last year, we did our tax returns, and we told them that we wanted to take advantage of the exemptions from VAT since we all earn less than 10.000 euro per year and we were told that they didn’t know how to do it. (...) That’s RPG’s fault. We didn’t even think of using Tribe, I don’t think they do good work. A lot of start-ups here feel the same... (...)”*

The selection of the associate companies, the chosen decentralized spot, the top-down management as well as the relatively long incubation time has been decisive for the public profile of RPG.

“They have taken some funding from XBank and they must do something with it. There is security guy and you have to say your name... you are treated like you are gonna steal something. It’s not an open space at all, it is too far away, nobody is going there. (...) There are some incubators that they are doing some excellent work and there are some others which are just... looser-towns.”

In addition, its strong connection with a bank has shacked its moral credentials. As Y. told me: *“I had seen {hub’s name} and {hub’s name}, but didn’t really inspired me, because, I am always concerned when I hear that there are banks behind”*.

VCX: Towards a selective morality?

“The new ambassador came and realised that there was huge unemployment, that a lot of Greeks were living Greece, and we realised that there was a lack of entrepreneurship, we saw that there were negatives stereotypes between Northern countries and Greece in other cutlures and we knew (...) that we wanted to share knowledge, so knowledge sharing, we also wanted to terminate the huge wave of brain mobility from the South to the North, basically these factors, made us to start this incubator and we used the same building as the Embassy (...).”

AN.

VCX can be characterized as one of the most successful cultural diplomacy initiatives taken in Athens during the time of crisis. Initiated by the Embassy in 2013, VCX is an incubator designed to

help startups from various fields by providing a common space and services such as mentoring, coaching, workshops and networking events. VCX became immediately identifiable due to its strong links with multinational companies. The foundation of VCX was based on donations and sponsorships of international companies, while the main donor is N.F.. International companies help VCX with three ways: sponsorship, contribution and mentors.

Every year there is an open call where candidates are asked to submit their business ideas. The sponsors along with a lawyer and a cost analysis firm get to decide if a business is viable. Right after the first selection, successful candidates are interviewed by the VCX management team. During in almost three years, VCX has managed to build a strong ecosystem and help more than 104 start-ups to grow intensively. Besides a shared workplace and its facilities, VCX provides an array of services such as mentoring, trainings on accounting and other business related topics, coaching. Moreover, taking advantage of its links with Europe, VCX cooperate with European Universities and with the help of N.F., it realizes an entrepreneurial residency. During its stay, the entrepreneur in residence offers advices and guide young start-uppers. VCX having a holistic approach over entrepreneurship, locates the entrepreneur in residence somewhere between the mentoring and the coaching service. Besides the formal procedures, the entrepreneur in residence is there to boost young entrepreneurs' self-esteem by fostering a strong entrepreneurial culture.

As some startupper mentioned to me {VCX} has been a very tricky case study regarding its funding and its ideological implications. Every three months, a very popular -among the start-uppers and the investors- pitch battle is being held, since the winner could earn up to 15.000 euros. V., a well-known creative entrepreneur who has been active since the 2000s, and 2 years ago he has founded a new hub in the centre of Athens, talks to me regarding {VCX}: *“{VCX} is an incomprehensible case, because while its first investment has been very interesting, there have been a lot of question marks as well regarding how an Embassy can intervene in this area, without even giving funding to its own initiative...It's a very complicated thing, since it got sponsored by foundations, it is very weird, and in terms of morality, it raises various concerns”*.

When {VCX} was celebrating its first year, the {VCX} team decided to do symbolic reforestations, planting some orange trees, in the national gardens of Athens³. One participant aiming to criticize this action not only as a sign of cultural imperialism but also a sign of an extreme of commercialization, he informally told me that *‘if you squeeze these oranges, you get a beer!’* as Heineken is one of the major sponsors of the hub.

X. explains to me how {VCX} strategy has changed over the years and has become more focused on the ‘profit’, as she put it more precisely: *‘Look, now it has changed, it has become more capitalist, and how can I put it? Their communication strategy is summarized into ‘come to win some money’, before it was more of ‘come to realise your dream, come to meet, to start your own business’. I went to the last pitch battle, because I used to go there from the very first day, and there were even Heineken promotion girls, there was black light everywhere so you could see the coloured Heineken bottles, Heineken pillows everywhere. OK, we know that Heineken is the sponsor, your name is everywhere, it was like we were in a club in Gazi.’*

It is significant that X. used Gazi as an example to illustrate how the whole process had been commercialized. Gazi is a central Athenian neighbourhood that has been fully gentrified and highly commercialized. It is often associated with the night economy, since the whole area have been

³ <http://startupper.gr/%CE%AD%CE%BD%CE%B1-%CF%87%CF%81%CF%8C%CE%BD%CE%BF-%CE%B3%CE%B9%CE%BF%CF%81%CF%84%CE%AC%CE%B6%CE%B5%CE%B9-%CF%84%CE%BF-orange-grove-%CF%83%CF%84%CE%B7%CE%BD-%CE%B1%CE%B8%CE%AE%CE%BD%CE%B1/>

dominated by bars and clubs, forcing the locals to move. Being at the same page with the previous participants, Y. who had won the first prize in a previous pitch battle there, he stresses that: ‘‘ (...) *So, people are paying fees to be part of the hub in order to be able to participate in this contest, but during the pitch battle, I saw people that I have never met, they are only in it for the money*’’.

R.: ‘‘We don’t invest on business ideas; we invest on creative people’’ V., founder of R.

R. is a cultural space situated in the historical centre of Athens. It first opened its doors in 2014 and it operates as a creative hub and a cultural centre simultaneously. Being located in one of the most deprived neighborhoods of Athens, R. building used to be the printing plant of the once famous ‘‘R.’’ magazine. The team that realized R. is constituted by 5 creatives who also run B., one of the first creative spaces in Athens. V., the founder of R. explains to me how the reputation of R. was used to re-brand the building and strengthen the creative identity of the place: ‘‘*It was like a creative industries’ ghost, it was cool as location and the story behind the building was very helpful in terms of communicating and promoting of our goal. The building itself gives an extra clarity to what we are attempting to do (...)*’’.

Being obsessed with the idea of reactivating such a building, B. team was working hard for three years to realize it. Even they participated and finally won a public competition for support through the National Strategic Reference Framework, they never received any funding from the State. The only way left to realise R., was through ‘‘creative accounting’’ which in practice meant that B. stopped paying its bills to the State for two years. B. team took a huge risk in order to make R. happen at the end. N.F. helped them with a small but crucial financial help right before they enter the building. Moreover, seeking extra support from the private sector, they collaborated with a telecommunication company. The company realized a Corporate Social Responsibility Project at R. aiming to help young creative entrepreneurs by providing 8 month scholarships to work in the creative hub.

The initial idea of R. was that companies according to their sector/ interests would ‘‘adapt’’ certain teams within the hub by providing financial support, mentorship and guidance to the participants. What the founders had in their minds was that R. could serve as link between creative people and the market, helping them to grow creatively their idea and fulfil their potential. This plan became in practice obsolete and now participants pay monthly fees to work at the hub. In order to secure diversity, participants are carefully selected according to specific criteria such as novelty, being up to date, and its creative field. They should come from architecture, design, fashion, services and ICT. It is this diversity that guarantees synergies and foster cooperation among its members.

Even V. was familiar with the startup vocabulary and he often used it during our interview, he almost never referred to R. creative community as a startup community. His aim was to differentiate from other hubs, by paying attention firstly to people than ideas. In order to explain this strict distinction, he tells me: ‘‘*we invest on people, not only in ideas. You will come and we will say that you have a potential in the future to do something unique. We don’t say your idea is very innovative, let’s invest on it because it produces ‘surplus value’.* (...) *It’s like we are giving space to service-based companies which design taxibeat, but we are not interested in hosting taxibeat team (...)*’’.

The hub is based on the idea of one stop shop which provides to its members whatever they need to realise their projects. Its extrovert character is being endorsed though its dual functionality both as a hub and also as a 24/7 cultural center. In turn, it is this unique duality that keeps the balance between the exclusive introversion of the hub and the openness of the cultural venue. R. team is in a constant dialogue with its residents by tracking their creative work, monitoring their performance and providing support. Gradually the more formal procedures have given space to more informal and

spontaneous meetings and get-together. So, even at the beginning, monthly meetings were scheduled with supervisors/ mentors and their teams, R. has adapted a more flexible bottom up approach. Synergies and collaborations occur effortlessly: *“A graphic designer needs something, for instance, to curate an exhibition, and he seeks help from the community. Or a developer needs a designer, so he approaches a designer from the community. So, there is this internal networking happening out of formal processes, it is self-organised and spontaneous.”*

The main responsibility of R. members is to participate by exhibiting their work at the Open Studios exhibition in R. This is a way for R. to evaluate its members and push them to be more productive. In terms of endorsing intensity and productiveness, R. will adapt a paradoxically smart plan regarding incubation time: *“We are now preparing to adapt a new model originally derived from an incubator in Portugal (...) every incubation year, the prices of the rent raise geometrically. So, the motivation for someone to stay in the hub should become stronger. It is interesting how this model works because it starts with almost zero rent and then you end up paying a lot. You must really want to stay in the hub and take advantage of it (...).”* What is being described is the attempt to launch a reciprocal cyclical model which aims to fully exploit the value created within the hub.

R. receives and evaluates up to 50 application forms per year and at the moment hosts more than 60 people in its private offices. Comparing to other hubs and incubators, there hasn't been a huge demand. This is due to the financial difficulties that most creative workers are facing at the moment. In addition, a lot of them prefer to rent a space on their own or with their peers since rents in Athens – even in the city centre- are reasonable priced. R. future plan is to launch a coworking space in one of its floors aiming to bring more creative practitioners in the hub. Moreover, aiming to expand R. creative network, V. is planning to maintain a virtual community where creative people could become members and take advantage of their membership by finding partners, creating synergies and approaching clients.

Concluding remarks

‘Soldiers of fortune’: Between self-exploitation and self-idealization

Young entrepreneurs carefully carve their career paths according to the free market's demands. They present themselves as flexible, eager to do spec work⁴, autonomous, self-motivated and above all, ‘creatively resilient’. Their identity is constructed along a narrative of self-exploitation and self-idealization. This narrative is constructed in a double move: An acceptance of their precarious working conditions as well as their work-life imbalance, and in turn an extensive idealization of their selves through a constant rejection of what is represented as ‘normality’. The devotion to a moral goal serves as the differentiating

As Kennedy observes spec work is common in the field of design: “Spec work, short for speculative work, involves people producing goods, usually cultural goods, without a guarantee of getting paid. For some designers, the most troublesome manifestation of spec work is the spec work competition, which brings amateur and professional designers together in competition with each other for payment for a design job which they all undertake” (Kennedy, 2013, p.228) element of young entrepreneurs towards their entrepreneurial counterparts. The young entrepreneur understands him/herself to be an entrepreneur, as his/her position in the creative entrepreneurial ecosystem at

⁴ As Kennedy observes spec work is common in the field of design: “Spec work, short for speculative work, involves people producing goods, usually cultural goods, without a guarantee of getting paid. For some designers, the most troublesome manifestation of spec work is the spec work competition, which brings amateur and professional designers together in competition with each other for payment for a design job which they all undertake” (Kennedy, 2013, p.228)

large derived from his/her ‘idiosyncrasy’. The motif of the ‘peculiar temperament’ was pervasive during our interviews.

In the context of constant crisis, recession is being embraced as the necessary corollary towards the construction of a Schumpeterian liberating narrative of entrepreneurship which leads to the personal fulfillment. Operating in the grey area between self-employment and paid employment, all young entrepreneurs agreed that there is no specific time schedule. They have already stopped counting their working timetable, since it’s has been replaced by an internal commitment to work 24/7. As it is described by Shih, ‘the pattern of the market becomes the pattern of the work’ (Shih, 2004).

One of the most significant findings of this research hasn’t been the blurring boundaries between work and life. The fact that work penetrates the life of the young workers has not been something new at all (Gregg, 2011; McDowell, 2004; Gill, 2007). What comes out of my research project is that the personal life can’t really exist on its own. The whole life is being structured and controlled according to the entrepreneurial narrative.

As another ‘soldiers of fortune’, young entrepreneurs have been trying to find their way into a more meaningful and fulfilling work. The road hasn’t been a bed of roses. Being committed to a 24/7 learning process, their skills are being modified through an ambiguous competitive process. In the same way, they are eager to amend themselves in every possible way.

This ethnographic research aims to capture and analyze this significant turn to what Andrew Ross has described as the self-sacrificial ethos of new labour (Ross, 2000). Hubs are spaces where this sacrificial way of working is being endorsed and encouraged as its flexible and informal character are designed to maximize intensity. Young entrepreneurs constantly push themselves beyond their physical and emotional limits by neglecting their health and their wellbeing. Most of the interviewees acknowledged the internal struggles that they have been through during their entrepreneurial ventures. Their lives have been characterized by an emotional turbulence as they have been facing countless setbacks.

Engaging into the ideology ‘fake it till you make it’, they promote themselves by showing how ambitious, determined and restless they are. At the same time, they have been suffering by a constant anxiety, depression and despair. The buzz around the start-up ecosystem has been created not because young entrepreneurs truly identify themselves as the next Mark Zuckerberg; it is more likely because start-ups represent the only way for workers to get trained. By entering the start-up world, workers aspire to gain qualifications and professional experience.

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