Joint book review

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Sharon Louden (ed.)
Living and Sustaining a Creative Life: Essays by 40 Working Artists
*Bristol: Intellect; Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 2013, $35.50, (ISBN: 9781783200122),
224 pp.*

Manos Spyridakis
The Liminal Worker: An Ethnography of Work, Unemployment and Precariousness in
Contemporary Greece
Farnham: Ashgate, 2013, £95.00, (ISBN: 9781409428244), 274 pp.

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Fragile work and conditions of work can be considered as a key characteristic of precarious employment.

On the face of it, the two books featured in this review could not be more different: one looks at the working lives of artists in the USA while the other provides an ethnographic exploration of the increasingly precarious working lives of workers in traditional sectors in debt-stricken and post-industrial Greece. Yet by reading them together, the reader can identify common threads with regard to employment insecurity, unemployment, money worries and the general effort for everyday survival. Most importantly, what emerges from the two books is the significance placed by both workers and self-employed artists on the meaning of their work and the preservation of their own perceived status and work identity. Spyridakis notes that 'the notion of work gains a more human aspect as it concerns how people conceive of their position within the structures they are embedded [sic] and how they attempt to manipulate them in order to achieve their ends' (The Liminal Worker (LW), 245). Indeed, this is a strong message in Louden's book too and after reading a few stories it becomes evident that despite the multiple difficulties, accumulating student debt and overall uncertainties, artists do everything they can to keep on working, to maintain a studio and to develop networks because being creative defines them as individuals. The struggle for creativity in many cases appears to be ongoing; one of the narratives in the book illustrates this point vividly: 'many artists with apparently thriving careers and gallery representations still had day jobs … are utterly broke, working full-fledged outside jobs, relying on money from their families, or some combination of the above. The art world is a hard place' (Living and Sustaining a Creative Life (LSCL), 75). As Kalleberg (2011) argues – albeit in a different context – in his book *Good Jobs, Bad Jobs*, the opportunity for advancement enables workers to construct satisfying career

narratives for themselves. This appears to be the case in both books as skills, knowledge, personal interest and secure employment provide workers with some form of identity or aspiration even under the most precarious work and living conditions.

Sharon Louden's book, *Living and Sustaining a Creative Life*, is a collection of short personal narratives of 40 female and male working artists, which unfold the everyday realities of balancing the need for being creative with the need for survival. Each story is presented as a small chapter starting with a photograph of a representative artwork. As a result, the book is both interesting to read and visually arresting. The book does not provide an analysis nor does it explore any theoretical parameters but it does contribute to an understanding of who artists are and what their work entails, as Louden sets out four main and optimistic goals. First to show the optimism in artists' work by turning obstacles into inspiration; second to explain that for some people, monetary values are not the only measure of success in our money-driven society; third to show the role of agency for artists by attacking the myth of struggling artists whose ultimate aim is the production of a great work of art; and fourth to reveal the way education and community support is currently being funded in a way that 'normalises and encourages competition' (LSCL, 10). Artists from different cultural and educational backgrounds and different strands of life, from poorer or richer backgrounds, are brought together in this book to give accounts of their education, career, artistic work and everyday family life. The book certainly focuses on and discusses the four goals and the optimism is evident in most accounts. However, this would always have been the case as the sample of artists appearing in the book consists of those who make the decision to continue their work at any price. It would have been interesting to read accounts of artists or art graduates who tried and did not succeed or who left the art world as soon as they completed their degree. Such comparative narratives would help to fully explore the factors and social conditions involved in decisions to remain in or to quit art. One of the artists perfectly illustrates this point:

> There are many reasons that we remain silent about labour conditions in the art world. The world of art is entrenched with issues of class and dependence on corporate monies and the art work has become the only focus, which probably explains why so little attention is paid to the conditions of artistic labour, even among artists themselves. (LSCL, 81)

Finally, the collected narratives also present a gender perspective as some female artists explain their work and life arrangements, their care responsibilities for their children, their thoughts on bringing up a child as a self-employed (and often struggling) artist and their worries of combining motherhood, part-time work and creativity.

A study of the meaning of work across three different sectors is presented by Manos Spyridakis's study of the 'liminal worker'. The book is structured in two parts. Using Victor Turner's notion of liminality, a concept that describes 'individuals as liminal entities, who are neither here nor there … a situation where one's position in the community is uncertain and not fixed' (LW, 17), Part 1 contextualizes liminality and the conditions under which it emerges. Part 2 presents the results of case studies from three different sectors: tobacco, shipbuilding and banking. The book places contemporary work conditions within the neoliberal policy environment and questions neoliberal assumptions about the rationality and autonomy of workers' decisions and choices. Spyridakis's argument and data here show that workers' decisions are placed in particular socio-political power

structures. Within the context of post-industrial employment the term 'liminality' is used to capture the ambiguity generated by the passage from a secure work environment to one of instability and unemployment.

The first case study explores the experiences of tobacco workers in the Keranis factory in Piraeus, established in 1926. The company had been a relatively prosperous one providing stable work for both male and female workers and for many generations, but closed in 2007 resulting in mass unemployment, disputes over unpaid wages and overall declining social mobility and deprivation. The chapter presents stories from former workers describing their long-term and secure career: stories that give a glimpse of work in the tobacco industry. The second case study is conducted in the shipbuilding industry in the Perama area, a suburb of Piraeus, and examines its subsequent casualization and subcontracting practices. As in the first case study, shipbuilding workers expected a degree of job security because of the specific skills they possessed but the economic crisis created job insecurity. A quote from George – a skilled tube-maker – illustrates the point: 'Workers back then felt things were settled down and put in order' (LW, 159). The third case study considers the banking sector where employees describe their everyday endurance of harassment by higher-level management, tight schedules and scrutiny over their productivity. A quote from Demetra, one of the bank employees, summarizes current employment relations in one of the banks:

> How does the bank work? It trades money for money, and therefore its goals are always determined on this criterion and goals are a cruel thing; no matter how much you offer, no matter how much you give, they will always ask for more… (LW, 187)

The three case studies provide an insight into the structures and work in three industries affected by rapid changes, intensive restructuring and closures. The wealth of data gathered is explored through the Marxian antithesis between labour and capital, questioning neo-classical economic views and emphasizing how workers' decisions are embedded in socio-political power structures. It would have been helpful to learn more about the use of migrant labour in order to better understand the dynamics of vulnerability, fear, comradeship or division. However, this is a thought-provoking book with three case studies showing the loss of belonging as workers have been 'hanging between two states of identity, experiencing a liminal existence' (LW, 241). At the same time, and this can also be detected in some of the stories in Louden's book, strategies developed by workers to confront or deal with their situation of insecurity do not appear to challenge the mechanisms that create vulnerability but are based instead on compliance, mainly because of fear: fear of the lack of security, fear of unemployment and fear of diminishing employment rights.

Louden and Spyridakis both expand on the notion of the meaning of work within uncertain working environments or working conditions, showing that individuals respond to challenges by making decisions based on their experiences and their understanding of the work structures within which they have to operate.

References

Kalleberg A (2011) *Good Jobs, Bad Jobs: The Rise of Polarized and Precarious Employment*. New York, NY: Russell Sage Press.

Turner V (1969) *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure*. New York, NY: Aldine.