
Mechanisms of Social Exclusion Through Vocational Education

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Abstract: *This article presents the findings of an ethnographic study that traces the interconnections between a sector of the Greek vocational education, represented by the Greek maritime schools, the professional world of the Greek seafarers, and a particular type of social network pervading the Greek shipping industry. The internal arrangements of the Greek maritime networks are often discreet, nonetheless they have practical consequences. Within these networks, people choose to associate with others who are similar to themselves in some salient respect, thus creating a culturally embedded network. Moreover, the informing influence of their professional ethos results in the organizational upholding and moral sustainability of such networks. Amongst the notable findings of this ethnographic research is that education and training within the Greek maritime education is interwoven with and constantly informed by a dominant professional ethos, while the embeddedness of this sector of vocational education within the larger maritime networks is partly accountable for a number of cases of social exclusion.*

Keywords: social exclusion, education, social networks, ethos, communities of practice.

1 Introduction

A first investigation of the question reveals a surprising fact: there is no agreed definition either of the concept of 'social exclusion' itself or of its main causes (Levitas 2010). A number of definitions have been proposed such as the 'inability to participate effectively in economic, social, political and cultural life, alienation and distance from the mainstream society' (Duffy 1995) or 'the dynamic process of being shut out (...) from any of the social, economic, political and cultural systems which determine the social integration of a person in society' (Walker and Walker 1997:8). One more definition of social exclusion is the 'lack of social relations' (Pantazis, Patsios, & Levitas, 2004).

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These definitions put the accent not on the material condition of poverty itself but on the relational and participatory dimension of social life. Moreover, if ‘social exclusion’ is taken as a concept translating the non-participation in an elite of decision-makers, then we should considerate its embeddedness within frameworks involving their local, regional, and global positioning, and in relation to the conditions of functioning of late capitalism. To this regard, Castells’ (1996: 106) notion of *selective inclusiveness*, as a characteristic of today’s global economy, offers an analytical framework that is helpful for this presentation. In my understanding, selective inclusiveness is equivalent to a form of social exclusion that can present itself under a variety of configurations, non-limited to the statistically attestable poverty criteria. Within this point of view, social exclusion in present conditions could be equivalent in meaning with non-participation in the decision-making processes of instances of power or in those presiding over tightly knitted social networks.

As of the relation between education and social exclusion, and if we follow the line of thought of Bourdieu (1977, 1984), we could acknowledge that the school system contributes to the reproduction of inequalities and of the structure of class. Within this paper, I argue that one of the outcomes of the Greek maritime education is the reproduction of *parochial networks* (Bowles and Gintis 2004) through the reproduction of a particular human type (or a professional model). The human type in question is the bearer of the *Greek Nautical Ethos* (: *naftosini*), in other words the fact of being “a good Greek seafarer”.

2. The field

This study takes as its field the Greek-owned merchant ships aboard which both Greek and non-Greek crew members live and work together. I have gathered most data at the site of the Merchant Marine Academy of Greece (N. Mihaniona), where young marine apprentice officers study when they are not aboard ship for their practical training.

2.1 Methodology

This research uses qualitative methods, mainly semi-structured interviews of marine cadets, students of the Merchant Marine Academy of Greece, as well as mature seafarers. I conducted a total of 39 semi-structured interviews during an 18-month period. I selected the 39 interviewees from a population of nearly 400 persons—mostly, but not exclusively, young trainees of the Greek Merchant Marine—with whom I had a sustained personal interaction for at least four months at a time. A considerable number of informal interviews served as an intermediate step between the initial stage of personal interaction on a day-to-day basis and the final stage of the 39 semi-structured interviews for the purpose of selecting suitable and consenting interviewees.

3. An Overview of Greek Maritime Education

Greek maritime education is one of these institutions that are both firmly embedded in a particular culture, thus possessing an identity resulting from that fact, and responsible for reproducing a labour force targeting the global market.

3.1 The Curriculum

Student life at the Merchant Marine Academy of Greece follows a number of educational periods, including two educational voyages aboard a ship, and assigned as steps towards a completed curriculum. This ‘sandwich-type’ training permits the familiarisation of the students with the real milieu of their future professional activity. During their stay on board, for a total duration of 12 months, the students, according to the official discourses of maritime-related institutions, discover ‘what a seaman's life is’ and ‘learn to love the sea’.

The educational periods retrace a process of transformation, a series of steps beginning with the initial entrance into the environment of a rather ‘total institution’ (Goffman, 1961) and proceeding towards a new and radically different state of social being, a different human ‘quality’. This process of transformation will be presented and

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analysed here with the help of concepts borrowed from Van Gennep's (1960 [1909]) *rites of passage* approach.

3.2 The Passage

I. First Semester at School

The first semester starts a few moments before the youngster enters the guarded gate of the establishment's enclosure. The fence surrounding the school's campus is another reminder of the establishment's character, one with more than a few traits of a 'total institution'. Newcomers to the Merchant Marine Academy will soon find themselves in a 'betwixt and between' position, where they will experience a suspension of the normal rules of living (Turner 1969: 94-5). The time period after the initial first crossing of 'the Gate' is felt as 'upsetting', 'disorienting', and 'oppressive' by a majority of the students. Alternatively, a minority of students report positive emotions.

II. First Educational Voyage

This first educational voyage is described by the students as the most formative experience throughout their entire curriculum. During their first educational voyage, apprentice officers come into contact with the 'sea' and start learning it. For a limited number among them it is a positive, or even 'mind-blowing', experience. If the first semester at school provoked in the students a feeling of separation, then the first educational voyage onboard a ship placed them in a liminal state. However, it is already possible to distinguish among them those who are willing to follow a career as seafarer from those who are not.

III. Second Semester at School

Returning to 'the School' after having experienced what life aboard a merchant ship looks like is the equivalent of passing a threshold, and having the desire to do so. It is exactly at this moment of their educational process that a

number of students fail to demonstrate the desire to continue any further. It seems that at this stage of their initiation into the 'human quality' of a seafarer, the students start discovering what the elements of a subsequent ethos might be. An overall picture concerning the elements of the Greek Nautical Ethos (thereinafter GNE) emerges gradually from the students' own narratives. A number of recurring themes in the students' discourses reveals the constitutive elements of the GNE.

Recurring Themes

- I. Devotion to family values
- II. The importance of paternity as a 'model'
- III. The importance of kinship relations
- IV. The importance of 'trust' among friends
- V. The importance of the community of origin (village, town, island)
- VI. The importance of the ideologically constructed community
- VII. The importance of hierarchy

IV. Third Semester at School

In many regards it represents an extension of the second one. There is a continuation of the mental processes of sorting, valuation, and categorisation of the feelings, role models, and relational patterns encountered aboard ship.

V. Second Educational Voyage Onboard a Ship

The second educational voyage serves as more than a repetition of the first one. A limited number of students drop out at the end of it, while for the majority among them it is the consolidation of what they have learned, internalized, or rejected during their first equivalent experience. Analysis of the students' interviews and accounts shows that for the majority among them the second educational voyage appears as an *enhancer of the feelings and emotions* experienced through their first voyage.

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VI. Fourth Semester at School

Students returning from their second educational voyage aboard a ship tend to hold more balanced discourses about the prospect of their having a career at sea. From a different point of view, the fourth semester at school represents a period of what could be called *thoughtful liminality*. Students gradually become aware of their liminal position and are increasingly critical of it. They seem quite sure about what the seafarer's profession entails in terms of duties and inconveniences, as well as rewards.

VII. Fifth Semester at School

During the fifth semester at school, the students' discourses tend to be aligned with what we could call the 'standard seafarer's discourse', at least when considering the discourses of the ones who express a desire to remain in the profession.

VIII. Sixth Semester at School

The sixth semester at school corresponds to the final stages of the *shrinking of liminality*. Students have chosen parties: Either they are willing to become seafarers or not. However, even those who are not willing to make a career out of this profession are focused on their moment of graduation, clearly willing to get their (otherwise useless) diploma. It seems that for these latter the graduation itself represents a threshold whose passing gives right to a positive (self-) evaluation, an upgrading of their personal status.

3.3 Mature Seafarers

Mature seafarers have been students, apprentices, cadets. They are those among those students and apprentices who did not drop out from school, nor did they abandon the profession shortly after graduation. They have chosen to remain at sea. However, it is not always certain for how long they are willing to stay at sea.

An important division line lies between those who are willing to finish their professional career as seafarers and those who want to work at sea for just the minimal time needed to allow them to 'gather enough money' in order to establish themselves professionally off board. Among those who are willing to remain seafarers forever, tenaciously moving to the ideal centre of the community of practice, a small number might one day become *monahovapori* (plural of *monahovaporos*, see below) ship-owners themselves.

3.4 Monahovapori

A *monahovaporos* is a ship-owner who owns just one ship, or a part of it. Often a *monahovaporos* is also the captain of his ship. A *monahovaporos* occupies an intermediate level between a 'big' ship-owner and a simple seafarer. Below are reported a number of discourses offered by *monahovapori* during interviews, general data, and my commentaries.

His father's Son

'My father made me who I am' declares 'X', a *monahovaporos* ship-owner.

'My father, a captain himself, urged me never to deviate from this [maritime-related] path, from the family tradition', declares 'V', another *monahovaporos*.

Both 'X' and 'V' come from a well-known *naftotopos* (town specialized in shipping-related activities) in Greece. Although they no longer live in their birthplace, they maintain strong attachments and ties with their town of origin. They share similar socio-political convictions, similar sets of values, and a similar propensity for social networking. They easily and openly declare themselves as being 'traditionalist' and 'right-thinking'. Both 'X' and 'V' share a similar family habitus. From an early age they learned to respect family ties, accepting the father as the role model *par excellence*.

Swartz (2002: 62S), in his commentary on Bourdieu's definition of habitus, explains that 'the habitus consists of deeply internalized dispositions, schemas, and forms of know-how and competence, both mental and corporeal, first

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acquired by the individual through early childhood socialization.'

In both 'X' and 'V' cases, taken as illustrative examples out of a more extended corpus of similar accounts, the importance of early childhood socialization imbued with the fundamental values of the GNE becomes apparent. In the frames of the same habitus, 'X' and 'V' show an unambiguous respect for elders and seniors. They feel and openly express a strong emotional attachment to their community of origin, including people coming from that place. 'X' and 'V' value the virtues of trust among friends and business partners and loyalty in relationships between persons of unequal social status.

'X' and 'V', acting as they do, tend to consolidate and reproduce not only a hierarchy of values but also a hierarchized social world that is structured in conformity with these values. In all their social relations they tend to be selective, that is, to privilege these individuals who share similar values to theirs. In acting as they do, the *monahovapori* consolidate existing networks of people sharing the same values, while creating new ones of the same type. Their social networks tend to be informed not only by a theoretical adherence to similar values, but also by an everyday practice that transforms these values into tangible social relations. These preferential social relations are not without consequences on the economic and financial level. Preferential social relations, or social capital (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992: 119), are quite often followed —and reinforced- by flows of economic capital. There is a flow of economic capital from the *monahovapori* to their employees. There are equally such flows among ship-owners and their business partners of any kind. There can be such flows between ship-owners and town councillors, as for the —thoroughly legal- financing of a candidate's campaign. Acknowledged on these grounds, the circulation of economic capital serves as a recompense for the fact of belonging to a specific social network, and as an accolade for the virtue of sharing a specific set of social and cultural values, herein described as the core values of the GNE.

However, it must be noted that even more important are all the parallel repercussions and results of the process.

Apprentice seafarers who try to imitate the *monahovapori*, are at the same time striving to comply with a specific role model, and thus to reproduce a particular human type. Some among them are successful in their efforts and are consequently chosen, by the already existing *monahovapori*, as *trusted* employees, or as *trusted* business partners. The chosen become at the same time members of a social network of a particular type that we can call *nepotistic* for its kinship-centred character and relevant ethos, and of a community of practice.

We should, however, keep in mind that the act of choosing—or co-opting, or electing—someone is always twofold in its character and consequences. For each one individual chosen by the *monahovapori* as a fitting member of their shipping-related network, there is at least another one who is dismissed as unfit. Even mature and sea-beaten seafarers who fail to comply with the requirements of the GNE—which, we should not forget, is constantly redefined, reproduced, and reshaped by the influential and dominant members of these networks—can find themselves at the margins, or the drop-out end, of the screening process.

4 Discussion and Conclusions

The Merchant Marine Academy is an educational institution, but also the site of a particular community of practice related to shipping. Amongst the members of the Academy are a number of students, teachers, and trainers who are exchanging information in such a way that they are creating a community that ‘defines itself in the doing’ (Wenger 1998: 4). The participants in this community of practice are those who are willing to act as, or learn to be, or teach others how to be, a ‘good Greek seafarer’. This same community ‘exists because participation has value to its members’ (Wenger 1998: 4). Being fully invested with *naftosini* does not have the same value for all seafarers, teachers, or students. Members of the community of practice under scrutiny are only those for whom full access to *naftosini* is highly valued.

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Inclusion and Exclusion in Networks and Communities

Bowles and Gintis proposed the concept of 'parochial networks' as a methodological tool that can better grasp the particularities of such human associations as 'close knit residential neighborhoods and ethnically linked businesses' (Bowles and Gintis 2004: 1). The authors argue that such associations 'often achieve high levels of cooperation while engaging in exclusionary practices that we call parochialism' (Bowles and Gintis 2004: 1). The reason networks of this type exist in the global economic environment of late capitalism is that 'losses incurred by not trading with outsiders are offset by *an enhanced ability to enforce informal contracts by fostering trust among insiders*' (2004: 1, my emphasis). My own remark here is that the networks depicted by Bowles and Gintis appear as having many common elements with the 'nepotistic networks' of which I have already made mention in this article. One important common trait is the significance of trust as a means to assure cohesion among the members of the network and to minimize risk and uncertainty.

There are two interesting points to underline here in respect of the nepotistic networks and in comparison with Bowles and Gintis' (2004) parochial ones. First, the screening/filtering function of the GNE serves to produce culturally homogeneous social networks; in such a way 'cultural affinity supports cooperation' (Bowles and Gintis 2004: 2) within the Greek maritime (nepotistic) networks. And second, the entire educational endeavour that transforms a young cadet into a seafarer imbued with GNE and willing to become one day a *monahovaporos* himself/herself could be translated as an inducement to the reproduction and strengthening of a culturally homogeneous network that offers competitive advantages to all its (new as well as older) members.

It should be noted, however, that Bowles and Gintis argue that 'members [of parochial networks] do not normally express their identification with networks in terms of their economic advantages. Rather, they typically invoke religious

faith, ethnic purity, or personal loyalty. These sentiments often support exclusion or shunning of outsiders' (2004: 2).

It is this 'shunning of outsiders' that I consider as a discreet, or concealed, case of social exclusion, at least when these networks are operating within open societies of a modern type. In an important number of accounts taken as data for this article it is revealed that what is hidden behind the values of 'religious faith, ethnic purity, or personal loyalty' is a pervasive nepotism often organized according the rules of a hierarchical principle that has little in common with piety, objectively acknowledgeable ethnicity, or equality-based affective engagement.

Ethos, Habitus, and Educational Communities of Practice

Smith (2003) argues that 'the concept of ethos connects with Bourdieu's "habitus" and the notion of situated learning' (2003: 463). For Smith, 'ethos can be defined as an organization's habitus'. He suggests that 'habitus external to the school provide dispositions that continuously construct and re-construct school ethos, and the evolving ethos itself provides developing dispositions and contexts for situated co-learning and participation in communities of practice' (2003: 463).

Commenting on the above, I would argue that the GNE, or *naftosini*, appears as an ethos that is shared by both an educational institution, the Merchant Marine Academy, and the professional world of Greek seafarers and maritime-related professionals.

In Smith's view, 'organizations continually construct and re-construct themselves under the ecological influence of individual students' habituses and those of social institutions in the external environment' (2003: 463).

If the Merchant Marine Academy can be taken as such an organization, I could agree that it is continually reconstructing itself 'under the ecological influence' of a number of social institutions 'in the external environment'. As we can see through the analysis of the data used for this work, not all members of the shipping-related professional world share homologous habituses. Instead, those who do share a habitus that is compatible with the GNE's values are the best prepared for an ascending professional career that

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could lead them to the higher hierarchical positions of the Greek maritime (nepotistic) networks, as those occupied by the *monahovapori* ship-owners. In consequence, the filtering out of the 'unfit' begins during the students 'rites of passage' period.

It would be useful to retain Smith's (2003) idea consisting in the acknowledgement of *social segregation*, or *social exclusion*, as a parallel outcome of a technocratic but socially insensitive admonition to 'improvement' that often characterizes official policies in the field of maritime education. I would argue that we are here in the presence of a discreet, or concealed, form of *social exclusion through education*.

Stamelos (2003) argues that 'exclusion can be either official [institutionalized], or informal [as implemented through broader] social and schooling practices' (2003: 1). It is exactly that second dimension of potential social exclusion through the play of informal ways of educational exclusion that interests us here. If we accept that the (implicit at least) *direction* of Greek maritime education is to produce vectors of *naftosini* through reproducing the GNE at all levels of the educational process, then we could presume that the very success of this endeavour would represent a case of *social exclusion through education* for the culturally and/or idiosyncratically maladaptive to the GNE's canons.

What we are witnessing here is a cultural segregation (i.e. separating the willing vectors of the GNE from the unwilling) that is the precursor of an anticipated social segregation (i.e. segregating the 'fit' members of the Greek maritime [nepotistic] networks from the 'unfit'). We can conclude that the reproduction of the GNE through education and practical training corresponds to the reproduction of conformity with a (sub-)cultural model. To tackle the negative dimension of the process without impairing the quality of knowledge transmission, it would be useful to consider an important body of works of specialists in Greek education who have contributed a valuable literature concerning the relations between education and social exclusion (Liambas and Kaskaris 2007). Furthermore, a comparative analysis undertaking the difficult task of a synthesis of the above important contributions to a socially

relevant scientific knowledge with the findings of my research as presented in this article would be to the benefit of both maritime education and the elaboration of theoretical tools permitting the development of a socially conscious education in general.

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