



RESEARCH PAPER

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**THE PARADIGM OF THE INTEGRATION IN GLOBAL
COMMODITY CHAINS OF GREEK ENTERPRISES IN THREE
INDUSTRIES AND THE DEVELOPMENT OF
ORGANIZATIONAL FLEXIBILITY BEFORE THE CURRENT
CRISES**

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(Researcher, completed her doctoral thesis

in the Panteion University in Athens, Greece)

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Abstract

The present paper is based on the findings of a PhD thesis with title: 'Globalization and Organizational Flexibility – the paradigm of organizational flexibility in tree industrial branches in Greece'. Research was based on the branches of garments, textile and auto industry, and it was aimed in two central consequence issues:

- a) The manner of the integration of Greek enterprises in networks of the global commodity chains and the type of flexibilities they choose to cope with the fierce competition which they face due to the functional integration of networks; and
- b) The implications of adaptation of such a type of flexibilities in labor force so in the inner of the same of enterprises as in the networks of subcontractors and suppliers in their outsourcing transactions. What is proved is that the Greek enterprises are absolutely incorporated in the global commodity networks, as they develop relationships both with the leader transnational enterprises of webs – that theorists of global commodity chains nominate as 'the forward links' of the commodity chains – and with the subcontractors and

suppliers – that theorists respectively nominate as ‘the backward links’ of the commodity chains, and that the manner of integration depends on the specific characteristics of the type of organization and the function of chains.

It was also improved that enterprises in order to face the fierce competition that is increasing in the networks, adapt a system of organizational flexibility that combines elements of functional and numerical flexibility, in which the central axe is the decrease of labour cost, with result on the one hand the decrease (substantial in most of cases) in the number of their tenured employees and the increase in the number of temporary employees inside them, and on the other hand the assignment of an increasing part of their action –mainly the intensive labor stages of production, but not only these, as functions such as logistics, accountants, maintenance and cleaning are also assigned with increasing rate in outsourcing transactions – in subcontractors and suppliers in low labor cost countries.

The aim of the research the results of which the present paper presents, was to outline the type of organizational flexibility which the Greek enterprises developed in global networks in order to cope with the fierce competition, and its effects in different groups of employees. The choice of the branches of garments, textile and auto industry as fields of application for the empirical research which was held on 2007, took place with the rule that these specific branches constitute –according to the theory of global commodity chains [(Gereffi et al 1994; Gereffi 1997, Gereffi 1999; Campbell and Parisotto 1995)]– some of the most representative of the two types of global commodity chains, and as such, it was reasonable that the results from the research concerning the issues that was set up, will showed the characteristics, capacities, relations and rates of the type of the networks and the consequences in various categories of the labor force, as it has described in the theory of global commodity chains. The branches of garments and textile are considered as representative for the global commodity chains that are driven by the leading transnational retailers, whereas the branch of auto is respectively considered as representative for the global commodity chains that are driven by the leading productive enterprises.

The questionnaire of the research was applied to the twenty larger - concerning the assets and the number of employees according to the data base of ICAP - Greek enterprises in the branches of garments, textile and

automobile, with the intention to find out the consequences of the manner of entrance and the rate of their incorporation in the inner of the global commodity chains, of which the type of networking and integration of function is not but possible to have drastic results on the character of entrance, the kind, the manner of function and the organization of the productive activities of Greek enterprises. From the branch of garments corresponded ten enterprises, from the branch of textile corresponded eleven enterprises –two of them constitute the two of the three entrepreneur groups in the industry of textile in Greece – and from the auto industry corresponded four enterprises (which however are the larger enterprises in the industry in Greece, according to the list of ICAP).

The questionnaire was articulated in four basic unities which were about:

- a) Basic information for the firm, sector of principal activity, enterprising conjunctures (participation in larger conglomerates, structural changes (mergers or take-over) outsourcing, sub-contracting, personnel, compensation system, market environments.
- b) Use of new technologies (production, information and communication technologies).
- c) Use of numerical flexibilities in enterprise (part-time, temporary employment, use of overtime).
- d) Management of human resources: vocational education and training, new forms of work organization: work in groups, job rotation, learning of new skills.

The theoretical background of the research was based on the one hand on Atkinson's theory of flexible enterprise [Atkinson (1985)], related to the implications of the implementation from enterprises of two different strategies in aim to get flexibility and restructuring of the mode of production to the labor force both the 'core' and the 'peripheral', whereas on the other hand – in a more profound level – on the theory of 'Open Marxism' [(Clark 1990; Burnham 1997; Bonefeld and Holloway 1995)], which connect the implications of globalization of capital – in the sense of

growing mobility of capital in money form -, with the relation between the state and the capital and between the states themselves, and the reorganization that it brings about in the social relations of production in more favorable conditions for the capital.

A general finding of the research was the function of a strong process of concentration and centralization of capital which takes place in the three industries (with special stress in the industry of textile), and which is manifested in the stress of mergers, takeovers and the shape of power enterprising groups in the inner of which are participated enterprises not only from the industry itself, but from all the spectrum of industries of production. The aim of the process is the growing of shareholding, the growing of capital and the strengthening of the position of the leader enterprises in the entrepreneur groups in the stock exchange.

Particularly intense is the process of centralization of capital in the industry of textile, where the high mechanization and resolutions in technology have convert it from a branch of intensive labor to a branch of intensive capital, and in which the productive process, the power and control of activities of the industry's enterprises, are essentially regulated by the two large entrepreneur groups, which determine in national level not only the conditions and the resolutions in the activity of production, but even the production of the raw material (cotton : where, how and how many to be produced).

It is subsequent in the branch to be ascertained considerable restructuring and changes in enterprises conjunctures, through merging of smaller enterprises' productive units from the large entrepreneur groups, with the intention to decrease the cost of production, the financial expansion and the attainment of economies of scale. What is notable is that in spite of the high degree of verticalisation that is achieved by this process, entrepreneur groups are using in parallel subcontracting, allocating the realization of the intensive stages of production in which the use of technology cannot be applied, - e.g. the sewing of fabrics -, mainly to local

subcontractors, with the aim to cope with the temporary growth of demand of product, and the saving of labour cost.

The empirical survey in the three industries demonstrates that the Greek enterprises have developed intense links both with the 'forward' links with the leader transnational enterprises of the chains for which they act as subcontractors and suppliers (we find links with enterprises like: Benetton, Lacoste, Sloggy, Armani, Zara, Dizel, Nike, Adidas, Reebok, Gstar, Staff, in the industries of garments and textile, and: Honda, Reno, Volvo, Mitsubishi, BMW, Cragman in the auto industry), and with the 'backward' links with the low labour cost enterprises of the chains, which are acted as cheap subcontractors and suppliers of the Greek enterprises, mainly from the neighboring countries of Balkan, but also from Turkey, Egypt, Tunisia, as well as from remote enterprises in China and Far East. Such, seven out of ten enterprises in the garments industry undertake subcontract work from leader transnationals and nine of ten assign subcontract work, respectively in the textile industry the two large entrepreneur groups undertake and assign subcontract work (totally six out of eleven enterprises in the industry assign subcontract work), whereas in the auto industry the fore enterprises undertake and assign subcontract work.

The industry of garment

What is distinctive in the industry of garments are the intense efforts which the Greek enterprises make in order to remain and improve their position in the global commodity networks of the chain, with the use of strategic improvement of products' quality and production's process, namely with the production of specialized and higher quality products, the incorporation of modern production and communication technologies, and the application – although in restrictive scale – of new practices of work organization¹ –, whereas they achieve to reduce considerably the cost of labor for the most labor intensive stages of production, by establishment of subsidiaries and assignment of subcontracting in the lower labour cost'

¹ Namely with the use of strategies seeking competitive advantage of 'higher order', such as are described in the theory of development of webs in global commodity chains.

networks of enterprises, mainly in Balkan neighboring countries, Turkish and remote networks of subcontractors and suppliers in China and Far East², but even countries as Italy. The assignment in particular of subcontracting is of two kinds:

First, it concerns the assignment of parts of production with the system named 'fason', namely with the assignment to subcontractors the production of particular parts of garment, with the providing and controlling of quality of raw materials and productive process from the employer Greek enterprise, and

Second, it concerns the assignment of production of total product to the subcontractor, always under the specifications of the Greek employer enterprise, in such a way that is concluded that the large Greek enterprises of garments act with the way that is proper to the leader transnational enterprises of the industry.

Actually, it seems that the large Greek enterprises in the industry of garment use the abilities of improvement that are provided by the functional integration of global networks – as theorists of the global commodity chains are suggested -, as long as instead of the intense competition that is developed in global commodity networks of the branch, they achieve to retain and in many cases to improve their position in them, moving to the higher added value productive activity, as it is the design of specialized products and prescriptions of production, and whereas they produce named and high quality's products on behalf of and according to the specifications of the large transnational enterprises-principals, they simultaneously achieve to form their own named products, which in some cases achieve to promote to their own trade networks, utilizing the proximity provided by the European markets, and the forward (large transnationals) and backward (cheap subcontractors and suppliers) links of enterprises of the networks. As the empirical research demonstrated, in fact, the Greek enterprises sustain their viability and the improvement of

²Namely with the simultaneous searching for competitive advantage of 'lower order' as it is named in the theory of global commodity chains, and which is based on searching for lower labour costs by the exploitation of the abilities of applying numerical flexibility in the interior of the networks.

their position inside the networks, with the implementation of a system of organizational flexibility which is based on the combination of elements of functional and numerical flexibility, in the heart of whom, the aim of seeking for low labour cost is basic.

It is of course basic here to stress that the benefits of the implementation of organizational flexibility is find out in the biggest Greek enterprises of the industry in which our research was based, constituting only the one view of the consequences of its implementation, as long as from the other we can speculate about the shrinkage in the small and medium local subcontractors and suppliers, who face the consequences of the low competitiveness, as long as they cannot compete the extreme low labour and functional cost of their counterparts in developing countries.

The textile

High links with the named and transnational enterprises of retailers that lead the global commodity chain of garments found out as well that develop the two large Greek entrepreneur groups in the industry of textile, through the undertaking of subcontracting and ordering for the production of specialized threads and fabrics of specific type and prescriptions, for the account and under the leadership of the same the transnational enterprises.

The auto industry

But links-up with the named transnational enterprises in the assembling of autocar occurred in the bigger Greek enterprises of the industry, which however concern the takeover of subcontracting for the production or assembling or fixing of body's parts of heavy only vehicles, as long as the high intensive of capital and technology productive activities in assembling of passenger cars are exercised by the same the transnational producers enterprises, which keep and concentrate the strategic significance productive stages as the research and development – which are protected in addition by intense economies of scale-, and diffuse the activities of production and assembling of components and parts of body car in places

of low labour cost, exploiting the dependence and the structural control they exert in the organization of assembly of their multiple level subcontractors and suppliers in global level.

It is consequent then, that the Greek enterprises which act in the industry, to be able to insert in that piece of the global webs of production in the assembly of auto, which concerns the production of the components as well as the production, assembling and maintenance of the parts of the heavy only vehicles. The Greek enterprises in turn, utilize the low cost labour of local and foreign subcontractors and suppliers which are placed in ever lower steps of the assembly, by assigning parts of their productive activity, with main aims the saving of the cost of labour and the adaptation of production in the fluctuations of supply, whereas they try to move in the more 'central' significance activities which concern either the production of higher specialization and added value with the updating of their technological equipment, either the confinement of their activity exclusively in the field of sales.

Results of the three industries

The results of the empirical survey pointed out that the enterprises of the three industries face a specific upgrading of competition since 2000 in the global markets, for the combating of which they have proceeded in the introduction -in the same interval- of new technology of production and communication, the vocational training of employees and the changes in work organisation.

The special gravity of the efforts, however, for the growth of competitiveness in the enterprises of the three industries, is focused on the one hand in the introduction of the most modern technology which is applied in the industries (production technologies as CAD/CAM, ERP systems, EDI, CNC, BAAN, but also information and communication technologies as e-mail, internet, intranet and extranet) with the aim of growing productivity, the improvement of quality of products and productive process, and on the other hand in the exploitation of abilities of numerical flexibility, with the simultaneous growing use of temporary

employment in the inner of the enterprises and the extensive assignment of subcontracting with the aim of drastic decrease in labour cost, and less in quality upgrading of knowledge and skills of employees through the training and the application of the new practices of work organization. In the introduction of the most modern production and information technology have proceeded eight out of the ten enterprises in the garments industry and all the enterprises in the textile and the auto industry. Although the main form of employment in enterprises is the tenured form, half of the enterprises in the garments industry use temporaries in rates that fluctuated from two to thirty five percentage of their total employees, - with main aim the cover of the fluctuations of supply by the use of quarterly and six months' contracts - , ten of the eleven enterprises in textile use temporaries in percentage from two to twenty percent of total employees , whereas in auto industry temporary work is not applied.

The analysis of the empirical results pointed out also, that the application of organizational flexibility from the Greek enterprises doesn't brought about positive results for the 'central' employees – in opposition to the claims of the model of the 'flexible firm' -, converging so with the results of relevant researches [(Osterman 2000; Smith,V 1997; Kalleberg 2001; Lautsch 2002; Cappelli and Neumark 2001)].

Basic evidence for this, constitutes the decrease in the number of tenured employees in the vast majority of enterprises in the three industries, in most of which in addition, the reduction was substantial. In the garments industry six out of ten enterprises reduced their tenured employees, in four of them, the reduction was substantial. Respectively, in the textile, eight out of eleven industries reduced their employees, six of them substantially, whereas in the auto industry three out of four enterprises reduced substantially their employees. As the enterprises of the three industries declared, in recent years, they proceed in the introduction of new technology with the intention to grow productivity and competitiveness which combined by the substantial decrease in the number of their tenured employees, the reallocation of the remain staff, and the (partial) application of new practices of work organization, the assignment of part of production

process which till then was conducted in the inner of the enterprises to subcontractors and suppliers, and the increase in the number of temporary employees in enterprise.

The application of vocational training programs most of the time concerned a small proportion of tenured employees, mostly upper administrative and technicians, whereas of the new practices of work organization, teamwork seems to be applied in minimal, piecemeal, and where it is acquired by the nature of production process, and job rotation is applied in a small proportion of the staff, in specific occupations and fractions of the productive process.

In any case, the reallocation of competences which is attained by the entrance of new technology and the application of organizational changes does not coexist with the improvement of the content of work and the enrichment of the skills of employees, but with the addition in any employee of a number of low skilled duties, therefore with the intensification of work, which is not combined with the increase of rewards or compensative benefits for the employees. As a typical paradigm of intensification of work is referred the textile industry, where the introduction of new technology in every one line's machine of spinning were incorporated elements of function of many lines' machines, whereas in the past the employees operated only machines of one line.

The enterprises of the three industries stressed the abilities the new technologies offer (for example the application of the barcode system which is an electronic system for the control of the products), in the growing of the control of efficiency of employees, the positive effects that temporary work exerts in productivity and competitiveness, and the utility of job rotation in similar competencies in the departments, mainly for the turnover of the daily absences of their colleagues. The enterprises declared that the reasons for which they proceed in the realization of changes in work organization are: the need to constrict the dead time in production, the application of new technologies (they referred for example to the ISO systems that are connected with changes in work organization,

the introduction of technologies which are connected with labour assignment namely with the sharing and reallocation of duties, changes that concern the enlargement of duties in a large spectrum of the stages of production, that entails the growing in the number of duties of all the levels of hierarchy, from the production employees to the administrative, managerial and technical staff.

In a such a framework of application of modernization and restructuring of production, it is consequent not to exist a framework of theorization of positive effects because of the decentralization of the decision making in production by the management towards the team works and production workers, the ability of resolving unexpected problems and dysfunctions which ensued during the progress of production process, with relative autonomy and the receiving of initiatives by workers, such as the model of flexible system of production implies.

What is explicitly the research verifies, is the growth in the use of forms of numerical flexibility by the enterprises – either inside or outside them -, with intention the drastic reduction in the labor cost, a process which at the level of global economy results in the enlargement of the ‘peripheral’ labour force and the fragmentation of labour market, as a result of the increasing abilities for exploitation of numerical flexibility which are offered to the larger enterprises of industries, by the interconnections, interdependencies and flows that are formed between enterprises of variable forms and functions in the interior of webs of the global commodity chains.

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