

***COCOONED OR TRAPPED? THEORISING ABOUT GREEK UNIVERSITY GRADUATES WITHOUT STABLE EMPLOYMENT***

Following university and technical education, which represents the goal of many families and their children in Greece, graduates often face extended periods of unemployment or insecure employment. Understanding the way young graduates experience and confront unemployment is aided by examination of the cases below, which we consider under the following headings: family, gender and values; attitudes with respect to the labour market; career selection; personal life; perspectives on risk. We begin with the case study of Natasha.

**Family, gender and values**

The effect of the relationship of Natasha to her father and mother is the critical focus of her current life and relationship to employment. The lack of balance in the relationship between the male and female parental figures and the role models they provide for her, have affected her own socialisation and maturation. The presence of a dominant, authoritarian but loving father and a weak, less loving mother with whom she cannot identify are central themes in her lived life. Natasha is confronted with a defeated mother who, despite having taken tertiary level studies, spends her life serving others and, in order not to create problems, internalises her own anger, turning it into a long term depression, evident in her lack of ability to express positive feelings such as joy or affection for her children.

In contrast the father, though having to bear all the economic support of his family through very hard work, is the one whom she sees as positive, optimistic, with a sense of humour, able to implement his dreams and ambitions. Thus he is the person with whom she would like to identify. This is a form of the “Electra” complex where the father is a positive figure and the presence of the mother is too weak to act as a role model for the daughter. Natasha finds difficulty in identifying and adopting her role as a woman or as a job seeker - she finds a conflict constantly between the traditional subservient female role of the woman who is protected and loved, and the modern female independent role which exposes women to the risk of being unprotected and unloved. Her told life is thus a series of dialogues about how she tries

to make her own choices as an independent woman but how she constantly returns to the choices of her father and the security he provides. In order to justify her weakness in carrying out her own wishes, she refers to family values, categorising modern women as probably immoral. In her lived life her inability to fight for her choices and what she would like but feels she cannot be i.e. an independent modern female role, leads her into depression for two years and in this way she resembles her own mother and the way she dealt with unresolved conflicts.

The issue of gender roles is central to the form of the family and the dominance in Natasha's life of the Mediterranean patriarchal family. The specific characteristics of this revolve around the lack of structural power that women had. As Vergopoulos 1989<sup>1</sup> states eloquently: (our translation)

“ In traditional Greek society, which continues to survive despite the unavoidable changes caused by modernisation and development, the only central structure always dominant and present everywhere remains the Mediterranean patriarchal family.....

At the core of this paternalistic society one finds the prototype of the patriarchal family and at the heart of this is what else? The obedience and passiveness of the Mediterranean woman.”

Gender is also a significant factor in the choice of Natasha's career. There are clear distinctions for her between what are considered male and female occupations. Though her mother had gone against these conventions with her choice of civil engineering studies, her example is completely neutralised for Natasha since it has never been practised. On the contrary female occupations are those that do not conflict with her familial roles as mother and wife but also enhance or depend on being female e.g. beautician, actress, nursery teacher.

The importance associated with the family in her life decisions as a woman is evident in Natasha's told story with its most positive aspect being the protection it affords. She confronts the paradigm of her mother in this patriarchal family who, by following the traditional woman's role gains a degree of social kudos and personal satisfaction from her successful execution of the role of wife and mother as well as

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<sup>1</sup> Les Temps Modernes. Manesis, Bergopolos K. et al. Exantas. Athens 198, p.92

the emotional and economic security that the family , through her husband, provided for her.

The perception that family is the protective shell against the outside world for all its members is a critical element in Greek society. In particular dependent members are offered the protection of the wage/salary earners and take this to be normal. This dependency has become more prolonged with longer years of education, though there is a strong tendency for families to continue to support their children economically. Thus economic and emotional dependence is protracted long into formal adulthood, though the period of ‘childhood’ dependency relates to historical and class factors. The majority of the current generation of Greek parents are from relatively poor families, reflecting to the considerable and extensive poverty in Greece until the early 1960s. Hard work and limited incomes were characteristic of their earlier years but within their own lifetime they have experienced considerable increase in income allowing them to support their children in extended years of education. This phenomenon is evident in the majority of families, except for those who are still trapped in profound poverty that arises out of other factors such as chronic illness, single female parenthood (mainly from widowhood and divorce), and minority status (gypsies, Muslims).

Education has always been perceived by Greeks as the way out of poverty and dependence (Tsoukalas 1988) and a way of rising in the social structure. In the previous generation it was seen as an important investment for the upward mobility of the family and economic gain by the parents, with the educational successes of the children reflecting positively on them. According to H.Katakis (1984) parents look for psychological rewards when they educate their children rather than any form of economic reward; they live through their children and are proud or humiliated according to the success or failure of their child in education. In Natasha’s lived and narrated life this tendency is clear; in her family one brother is sent to study for a degree abroad and Natasha is enrolled in a private college while all the children take private language lessons. In many of today’s urban families education is now a way of attempting to confirm class status, while educational success by children gives parents the satisfaction of feeling they have carried out their parental task fully.

In Natasha’s narration she repeatedly talks of “family values” as a way of interpreting why she does not carry out her own wishes. Family values referred to the

way that the individual cannot let down the family and its name. The “name” of a family arises from the public face it presents. While in anthropological literature on family life in villages in Greece reference is made to the importance of family honour - involving the sexual behaviour of women (another form of gender distinction), men’s success in public and social life, and the successful execution of parental and spouse roles, - it is striking that two generations later in a metropolitan centre, reference to such values still appear to underlie many attitudes as well as much behaviour. However in the context of suitable behaviour in the cities it is suggested here that they are increasingly allusions to class related characteristics e.g. language, manners, dress and education.

Another interpretation of Natasha’s family values comes out of her lived life where it appears that some of these values may reflect the political ideological beliefs and practices of the father which are related to his Communist background. It is noticeable that Natasha in her told life makes no specific mention of the political beliefs of her father.

One of the observations concerning the current dilemmas in Greek society is whether to follow the individualistic development pattern, common in Northern Europe, or to retain the more collective group pattern that keeps people within the confines of the family and its wider social and political networks. Apparently it is very difficult to retain both of these simultaneously since once the family values and priorities which support the collective pattern are challenged then reconsideration of these values necessarily implies a change in the life course. In more individualistic patterns of organisation people are far more at personal risk; in the Greek context most remain within the context of collective entities. While all societies have “in - groups” to which individuals belong and with which they identify, the meaning of this term varies. Triandis et al. (1972) state that the “in-group” in the USA is defined by the individual in terms of “those who are like me, have the same interests.”; in contrast the Greeks define membership in terms “of people who care about me, and with whom I can create mutual dependence”. This term includes not only the immediate kin but all those with whom one has created such ties in terms of those who can be relied on in moments of need. The existence of the expression “he is my person” is very indicative. (Georgas D.1995)

### **Attitudes with respect to the labour market.**

The two central axis with respect to Natasha's choices concerning work, reflected in her lived life, are along the dimensions of what she defines as moral versus immoral jobs, and the dimension male versus female jobs. She presents herself as preferring a female but immoral job but as having been driven to choose a moral and feminine job. Since this was not her own choice she perceives this as the reason why she feels she cannot find work since she cannot persuade any employer that she is worth employing. In her told life she repeats that what is important is self-confidence, underestimating the objective factors that affect employment in this sector such as training, skills, experience, demand, supply.

It is striking that in Natasha's narration there was a distinction between pleasure and work, a differentiation that also appears in the other graduates. This may be in contrast with elements of societal tradition in Northern Europe where the effects of the Protestant ethic have made hard work and success in work give pleasure in themselves. In the Greek context work undertaken for one's own account or that of the family provides pleasure and satisfaction if successful, as a way of promoting the position of the family. Nonetheless Natasha respects work, perhaps because of the affection and respect she has for her father and as she identifies more with him than her mother. She seeks all kinds of part time or temporary work e.g. baby sitting, private English lessons both in line with the family values, which include hard work, but are commensurate with her female identity. She also perceives work as the source of potential liberation.

### **Career selection**

In Natasha's case her father made the choice of studies and college, based on his values (the same male/female, moral/immoral which he has transferred to Natasha) and the incidental information he had from a co-student of Natashas. He was willing to pay for her to enter a college in the private sector where Natasha could study to be a nursery teacher. This occupation is highly oversupplied with graduates at a time of falling demand for teachers, and private colleges are in competition with several university departments. The consequences of unemployment for graduates in Greece is unstudied, however it is known that many experience depression as a result of unemployment. The difficulty in this is to understand the causal relationship. In

Natasha's case depression is a theme that exists long before she needs to find employment however is manifest when she no longer has to study but has to take on her adult roles. She is faced by a crisis of depression at this time; in her told life she is clear that the way out of depression occurs when she discovers that she is good at sketching and this allows her to begin to believe in her capacities and self again. What is important in her explanation is not that this talent is personal and concerned with self development and a career, but is something that she can demonstrate to significant others - and of course specifically her father - as showing her worth. At the time of the interview she was looking for work in a female occupation, as a secretary, which indicates that she wishes to enter a more permanent sector of the labour market and become a more independent woman.

### **Personal life**

Characteristic of Natasha's told life is her depression which she links with a lack of self-confidence. A central theme and struggle for her is to show that she is worth something as a woman; this is very difficult for her to achieve, hence the long period of depression. It is also critical that she demonstrates this finding of her identity to men, importantly to her father, to potential employers and to boy friends. In her later adolescence she finds her sexual satisfaction in the form of masturbation, something which she entirely controls and that enables her to avoid men at that stage in her life.

Pleasure takes two main forms in her told life : the first is her creative and artistic side which she occasionally expresses though never fully develops. The second one is her physical freedom through different forms of escape - whether these be in the form of the motorbike she wanted to buy, the summer holidays, escape through windows to meet her friends, or masturbation. Some of these bear a risk which she appears to seek. One might suggest that she is in some respects well adapted to a changing and modernising society since she is able to create her own interests, excitement and has managed to develop her own personality which will be flexible enough to enjoy, at some points, taking risks in life and in some kinds of work.

### **Perspectives on Risk**

The risk for Natasha is that her depression and dependence on her father will make her marginal to the labour market. However in her narration she already gives indications that she has emerged from this period since she has chosen a new career path and a steady boyfriend. She appears to have chosen a boyfriend who is not in a position to dominate her since he is younger and also not in a steady well paid job. Thus she is able to experience a relationship with a man whom she may even be able to dominate. Natasha's positive experience of being loved by a man, her father, also means that she will be able to relate to others including her own children in an affectionate way. Essentially Natasha's period of risk in relation to depression, marginalisation and exclusion from the labour market, has probably already been passed through. Even if she was not able to find work, finding a suitable husband would be still a viable and meaningful option for her. The values of Greek society enable the incorporation into full adult status of young people not only through labour market participation but also through marriage and the setting up ones own family. While this will necessitate at least one of the members participating in the labour market, adult status comes primarily in such a case, from founding a new family.

Natasha represents a rather typical situation; she has difficulties in creating her own female identity within the modern society while having experienced many of the negative and positive aspects of the traditional patriarchal family. Nonetheless she has internalised many of these same collective values, has experienced a tremendous sense of security which, once she manages to escape fully into her own adult identity, will be manifest in her own life and family. In identifying with her father she escapes from the defeated women of the family and though having gone through an extended period of depression, she will not reproduce their life styles.

### **Conclusion**

Unemployment does not represent for Natasha the source of her problems, and thus employment does not constitute a solution. The struggle for Natasha is the search for her own, female identity rather than an issue of employment and survival. Despite this she will not remain outside the labour market since her values do not permit this and she also recognises the link that earnings have to independence. Another significant characteristic in Natasha's case is that she does not confine herself to the jobs related to her original studies but is flexible enough to perceive that

she has to offer something to an employer. In defeating depression she has come to realise that self knowledge and self esteem are critical weapons in life , while the support of her family allows her to gradually find herself in life and in the labour market.

## **Other Cases - similarities and differences.**

### **Family, gender and values.**

As in the case of Natasha the outstanding feature of the interviewees was their continued strong orientation to their family despite their ages, which were between 25 and 30 years of age. While the Mediterranean, patriarchal form of the family is adapting and changing under the pressures of the modern economy and conditions of modern urban life, each individual has to deal with the traditional and modern interpretations of this familial form that they confront In the case of Anna, the mother dies in her late adolescence and she is still suffering from this loss, making her depressed and indifferent to any permanent job or personal relationship. Another graduate, Andreas, also suffers the loss in his late teens of his dominant and successful father, which cuts him off from the possibilities of being supported into taking on his adult male role and entering the labour market easily. Thus he remains within his rich private life and activities, unworried by his lack of employment and having left this aspect to his relatives. Amongst the other four for whom such an imbalance was not evident, there were still signs of the effect of the male-female roles within the family and how these affected them. Though Cleopatra chose her own studies and career path, she felt she had gone astray from the wishes of her father in this, in comparison with her sister who followed in her parents' career footsteps. Throughout her narration she attempted to convince the interviewer (and herself) that she was right in selecting this profession. Petros is the only one who has developed a new career strategy to deal with his unemployment, the result of the economic pressure on him to become independent since his father is disabled. Thus he still lives within the patriarchal model as the only son who has to take on responsibilities for the whole family. Efterpi has followed the traditional female role within this type of



family. Jason is entirely identified with the male model provided by his father within a patriarchal, conservative family and in all his choices he refers to his fathers' values and judgments which he reproduces.

Despite the fact that all interviewees were from Athens where one might have expected a greater degree of individualism and separation from the family, support was forthcoming whatever the social and income background of the parents. All were still supported economically and emotionally by their parents as well as still living in the family house.

Family strategies and ambitions for their children have to be understood as a critical background to the behaviour of young people in the labour market. Thus whereas work, particularly dependent employment, in Greek society is still seen with considerable ambivalence in relation to personal achievement, social status is conferred unambivalently both on the individual and his/her family by having obtained a degree (Vergopoulos 1989). However this has led to the creation of an ever increasing number of young people with high academic qualifications who are unemployed since education no longer automatically gives access to better jobs. Many continue to be supported by their families in 'waiting for the right job'. Their worsening position in the labour market has made many children feel disappointed in the gap between the expectations they had from their parents and their actual experiences in the labour market. Thus Andreas could feel it was normal to blame his parents for not having obtained proper career advice and information about his future prospects, while both he and Jason reported that they have left the task of finding a job **entirely** to their parents.

In contrast to Natasha but appearing as a theme amongst several of the unemployed graduates was the belief that qualifications were not as important in finding work as having and using network connections; the term "meson" (connections) is much used in Greek society for all areas of social life and is linked with the idea of the in-group and who is "our person" from whom one can expect support and practical help, including finding work. (see above). As Vergopoulos (1989) states with reference to the family institution in Greece: "Social control, political authority, economic organisation, ideological and cultural systems are in accordance at all levels with the functioning mechanism of this unique and indissoluble institution..... "

Connections are important ways in which people find work and economic preferment with the main source of jobs being friends and relatives as well as family connections with someone in a position of power who is then asked to place the person in a job: it is estimated (Efstratoglou 1996) that over 70% of all jobs are found in these 'personal' ways and very few people use the formal state employment service which account for only 4% of job placements, the lowest rate in Europe.

Given that the state is by far the largest employer in Greece (32% work for the state, not including those employed in the wider public sector) while indirectly also providing subsidies and licenses to those in the private sphere, it has a critical effect not only in its structuring of the labour market but also in the way it affects the perception of parents and their children. Thus employment in the public sector has always been desired employment since though the wages are low it offers employment security and good pensions. It is noticeable that four of the graduates interviewed wished and felt they ought to find work in the public sector. Given the role of the state, a significant source of jobs is through political clientship and "connections"; politicians particularly outside the two main cities, are constantly asked for help in 'placing' someone into a job, whether into the public or private sector. Larger employers may be willing to help in return for later political favours. Thus there is cultivated amongst job seekers the impression that jobs do not by any means always go to the most qualified. Attempts have been made to rationalise the procedures for application to the desirable jobs in the public sector and this is evident in the very large numbers of young people who participate at all educational levels in competition for a place in the civil service.

One of the most commonly used phrases in Greece in relation to the labour market is the term "volema" - to be accommodated, to find an easy berth. The term implies easy money, not too much responsibility or competition. When several of the respondents declared their interest in being employed by the public sector, this primarily indicated their attitude of wanting to be 'accommodated' rather than participating as an individual with abilities in the development of a positive work relationship in a specific job. The idea of career is not cultivated either in the educational system or within the family; the primary interest is income or influence and/or a job with a social status

### **Attitudes with respect to the labour market.**

Another common feature of all those interviewed was their feeling that they had not received career advice and information in secondary school with respect to developments in the labour market and the demand for specific studies and jobs. They criticised the educational system in not providing information. While within secondary schools there are careers lessons, in general they are not taken seriously by students and only a few of the careers teachers have developed suitable courses. Thus it can be posited that reactions to finding work are influenced by this lack of knowledge, but perhaps as important for the unemployed graduates are their own attitudes to work. It appeared that for several (Efterpi, Natasha, Andreas, Jason, Anna) the obtaining of a degree was an adequate achievement in itself and conferred such a social status that as a result they felt that only certain jobs could even be contemplated subsequently, befitting the high esteem in which they held themselves as graduates. Three of those interviewed mentioned wanting any job as long as it was socially commensurate with their degree while another three mentioned that money was the critical issue, believing that they should be in receipt of a higher salary than that which is common for a first job and for someone without specific skills.

It is instructive to note that despite their age three of those interviewed (Efterpi, Andreas and Jason) have **never** had any paid employment, however temporary, in their lives.

Few studies have been conducted of the job seeking behaviour of graduates and there is a poor bibliography on the subject. Private employment offices have until very recently been illegal. Advertisements in the press are a growing area of employment opportunities. Approaches to the labour market are sex specific with men more likely to approach employers directly while women rely more on family and friends. Only those women in long term unemployment begin to change their strategies to approach those of men. Women however are more likely to look for opportunities for work from job advertisements in the newspaper and are also more likely to respond to advertisements.

### **Career selection**

In general the impression given by all of those interviewed was that they did not choose their studies in relation to the demands and future prospects in the labour

market but according to their individual ambitions, whether personal or familial. When they discovered that there were difficulties, three tried to take extra training courses but only one ( Petros) had a clear idea of labour market trends and demands.: he was also from the family with the greatest economic difficulties. Andreas stated that his parents had chosen his studies. Only one person, Cleopatra, has entered the university department of her first preference. The remaining four entered courses according to the number of points they had obtained in the Panhellenic entrance examinations. In the Greek entrance system those students who do not pass with enough marks for their chosen studies and department are given other choices of department in other universities where the entrance marks are lower, and these are often quite unrelated to their own wishes. While some departments and graduate subjects evidently have a greater tendency to produce unemployed graduates e.g. sociology, political science, nursery school teachers, within all higher education subject areas it is instructive to note that some graduates find work while others remain unemployed.

Five graduates had as their most obvious potential future permanent employer, the state since as graduates of archaeology, political science and gymnastics they were clearly oriented to becoming civil servants. However the oversupply of graduates as well as increasingly restricted demand for their services in the public sector is creating a crisis for many who have not become reoriented to the new conditions. Only well connected and very bright graduates would have a chance of being hired in any sector within their discipline. Thus many remain marginal to the labour market and have inadequate information, or networks (political, social and economic) enabling them to enter the labour market. They also have poor or non existent job search skills and have never been taught these. While many have a theoretical background few have practical relevant work experience.

There have been many discussions on developing the links between the labour market and the education system and to this end there has been a development in the past 4 years of careers offices both in specific university departments, in the universities as a general service and in the higher technical colleges (TEI). Private colleges also attempt to build up contacts with employers in order to be able to place students on graduation.

### **Personal Lives**

The personal lives of the unemployed graduates interviewed varied with their family, gender and personality. Jason's main focus in life, his interest and pleasure, are focused on one issue, women. Every period of his life is linked in his told life with the memory of girls/women. There are no other signs of interest and even his long term goals are focused on the founding of a family with a woman. Andreas, in contrast, finds interest in his creative work, e.g. writing poetry, newspaper articles, that is not linked either to his studies or to the labour market but to personal talents he has developed and believes he has. Women are not mentioned in his told life, except when he was asked directly, though friends are an important element in his life. Petros' main focus in his life is his search for a career and work and this orients him to spend most of his time in preparing for entrance examinations and training courses. He is the only individual in this small group who is almost entirely taken up with the issue of employment. Efterpi's personal life is linked with her boy friend, not so much as a sexual partner but as a potential husband. Her pleasures are within the framework of the traditional woman's role, living within the family and neighbourhood and keeping company with other women. Anna who is depressed in all aspects of her life, finds her self expression through investment in her new friends that represent people with the same interests and educational level with whom she can identify. Cleopatra is a person who projects little interest and excitement in life; her main pleasures revolve around excursions at the weekends.

### **Perspectives on Risk**

The emotional protection afforded by Greek families who undertake not only to provide social and financial support but also to help their children find a spouse and a job, helps account for the very low emotional stress expressed by these unemployed graduates with reference to this unemployment.<sup>2</sup> Additionally the widespread and publicly stated assumption that personal contacts are needed in order to find work, relieves the individual from having to make considerable efforts on his/her own or finding training courses. Again this can be seen as a mechanism which relieves individuals of guilt about being dependent and unemployed. Thus the sense of social

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<sup>2</sup> The one graduate obviously depressed at the time of the interview was still suffering from the death of her mother during her adolescence.

exclusion, in the sense of labour market exclusion, does not primarily come out of objective labour market conditions and experiences but out of the interrelationship between the individual, the family and the wider society.

Although there is much publicly expressed disquiet about the high rate of unemployment amongst graduates, it being seen and discussed publically in the media as a waste of their talents and studies, in reality it appears that Greek society is willing to bear the economic costs of their labour market exclusion by subsidizing them through the family and socially incorporating them again within the framework of the family. The form of the family in the urban environment is increasingly nuclear and the roles within the family have become far less patriarchal over the past 20 years (Safilios-Rothschild C. 1967). The resulting changes in gender and familial roles affects the children within the family with many being unable to identify with their new roles. The main risk for the unemployed graduates is thus whether they can be effectively covered by the family or will increasingly have to perceive and evaluate themselves within a more individualistic society which will judge them more harshly.

## **Conclusions**

Unemployment for these graduates is linked to the factors discussed above and summarised here :

1. lack of informed choices about career selection.
2. an educational and examination system that assigns people to courses and universities not of their own choice or interest
3. ignorance about the developments and trends in the labour market as well as the needs of employers.
4. lack of interest in a career as a primary focus in their lives.
5. a lack of pressure in relation to having to earn money, originating from the attitudes in many families since they are willing to bear the cost of unemployment for several years..
6. emotional support from the family which does not make the unemployed feel lonely, deserted or guilty
7. the attitude that a degree or equivalent qualification was an achievement in itself

These factors have to be born in mind in the context of high unemployment, including graduate unemployment. The question is not that there are people without jobs but why some specific people remain unemployed.

In Greece graduate unemployment as a proportion of all unemployment has risen from 4.3% in 1981, to 7.6% in 1990 and to 10.1% in 1995. (National Statistical Service of Greece). There is a greater surplus of university graduates, compared to other European countries, a problem that is increasing as the public sector is overcrowded, industry continues to downsize while new industries and services are slow to develop. A recent study from EKKE (1996) showed that the links between the universities and the productive sectors were entirely unsatisfactory as was the lack of connection between tertiary education, the economy and society. As a result non graduates who have completed post secondary training are often more desired in the labour market.

The National Manpower and Employment Organisation has introduced active labour market measures to aid the inclusion of young people, including graduates, in the labour market. These include subsidies to employers for the employment of young graduates, subsidies for new job places, for training, and for self-employment. The tax authorities also provide tax relief for the first 3-4 years of self employment.

The young graduates who do manage to find work tend to have at least some of the following characteristics :

1. accurate labour market information arising from their school, family and kin networks.
2. knowledge about how to find out about developments in the labour market and interest in this.
3. knowledge about what kind of characteristics employers are looking for
4. studies in academic subjects or in technical skills that are in demand
5. training after graduation in subjects which will help them be attractive to employers.
6. work experience
7. networks (family, kin., friends, political)
8. good self-presentation skills
9. flexibility in relation to work positions
10. positive career orientation

Some of the interviewees will necessarily have to follow some of the above guidelines in order to enter the labour market successfully. The problem is that many will continue to use as an alibi the fact that they don't have the correct connections in comparison with others, ignoring the other and far more important ways in which the other graduates have found work. Extended unemployment or temporary employment will lead them to feel marginal to the labour market and disappointed. However, within the immediate future they will not feel socially excluded in relation to the wider society since the society still accepts them as "educated" members and they have the support of their families. The risk for this group is that the changes in the structure of the economy and the overproduction of graduates will turn them into an unemployed or underemployed 'lumpen-proletariat'

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