

Ethos, Habitus and Social Segregation in Social Networks and Educational Communities of Practice

An Account of the Ecology of Greek Maritime Education

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Abstract: The ‘shunning of outsiders’ can be considered as a discreet case of social segregation, particularly when it occurs as a parallel outcome of an educational process taking place within the context of a vocational educational institution. Cultural affinity, as both a prerequisite and a final product of a target-oriented educational endeavour, presents the advantage of facilitating the circulation and sharing of information and of offering mutually shared codes for the decoding and understanding of the full meaning contained in the transmitted information in education. Nonetheless, as this research in the Merchant Marine Academy of Greece indicates, *social segregation* can be acknowledged as a consequence of an official admonition to ‘educational improvement’ in the field of maritime education. The findings of this research suggest that the reproduction of the Greek nautical ethos through education and practical training corresponds to the reproduction of social conformity within a cultural model of behavior.

Keywords: Communities of practice, education, seafarers, social networks, social segregation

INTRODUCTION

This study presents the findings of a research that depicts the ways in which the experience of being part of an educational institution, of a professional world viewed as a community of practice and of a social network, is interpreted by the members of these human associations. The educational institution is the Merchant Marine Academy of Greece; the professional world is that of the Greek seafarers; the social network is what it is hereinafter described as a ‘Greek maritime network’. These human associations are closely interconnected, while the educational institution plays a key role in the reproduction of the whole.

The research design is that of an ethnographic case study based on participant observation, semi-directed interviews and ‘ethnographic content analysis’ (Altheide, 1996, 2004). The author of this study is an educator working at the site of the research. The interviewees are either students or teachers of the Merchant Marine Academy of Greece, or mature Greek seafarers who have been trained at the same educational institution.

The field: The Merchant Marine Academy is an educational institution, but also the site of a particular community of practice related to shipping. Caution should be exercised here to avoid misunderstandings. I am not arguing that an educational institution and a community of practice are simply two overlapping conceptualisations of a one and only reality. A community of practice is not a structured institution. This study suggests that we can attest the ongoing formation of a community of practice at the site of an

educational institution. The findings of this research attest that 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). 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 ‘*kalos ellinas naftikos*’ (a good Greek seafarer). This same community ‘exists because participation has value to its members’ (Wenger, 1998). Being fully invested with *naftosini* - meaning that someone is performing as a ‘good Greek seafarer’ - does not have the same value for all seafarers, teachers, or students of the Merchant Marine Academy. Members of the community of practice under scrutiny are only those for whom full access to *naftosini* (the quality of being a ‘good Greek seafarer’) is highly valued. Moreover, this community ‘has an identity’ (Wenger, 1998), for its members recognise each other as such and draw boundaries between those among them who are partakers of *naftosini* and those for whom ‘love of the sea’ (deemed as a major characteristic of ‘good Greek seafarers’) is of lesser importance. Under the light of the above elucidations, we can say that there exists at the site of the Merchant Marine Academy of Greece a community of practice and that it is in close connection with other Greek communities of practice related to shipping, while all of these latter represent parts of the wider Greek maritime network.

EMERGING THEMES

Amongst the salient themes that have presented themselves during this research the most important is

ethos, especially in its particular configuration as 'Greek nautical'. In this context, ethos would be defined as 'the tone, character and quality of their (people's) life, its moral and aesthetic style and mood; it is the underlying attitude toward themselves and their world that life reflects' (Geertz, 1973).

Closely related to ethos is a concept borrowed from Bourdieu, *habitus*, acknowledged as an individual actor's disposition to behave in precise ways that are culturally meaningful. For Bourdieu, habitus would be 'a system of durable, transposable dispositions, structured structures predisposed to function as structuring structures, that is, as principles which generate and organize practices and representations that can be objectively adapted to their outcomes without presupposing a conscious aiming at ends or an express mastery of the operations necessary in order to attain them' (Bourdieu, 1990). In the context of this study, ethos and habitus have emerged as linked to the maritime-related communities of practice and specific types of social networks.

As formulated by Wenger (1998), "communities of practice" are groups of people who share a concern or a passion for something they do and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly. (...) Communities of practice are formed by people who engage in a process of collective learning in a shared domain of human endeavour.' If we summarize the characteristics of the communities of practice as defined by Wenger (1998), we realize that they are:

- Self-defined in the doing
- Valued by their members for what they are and through their participation in them
- Focused on a particular task or a set of tasks
- Bearers of an identity shared by their members

Brown and Duguid (2000) argue that if we take learning as a social act that is demand driven and identity forming, then it is possible to conceive it as a force that 'binds people together' (2000). Hence, they conclude that 'people with similar practices and similar resources develop similar identities' (2000).

Brown and Duguid's view can be thoroughly legitimated under the premise that it investigates the inside of a learning-driven construction of an array of precise occupational identities that are already and by definition, culturally situated. Thus, social learning transmitted through education and practical training within the context of Greek maritime education can be conceived as leading to the 'know how' of becoming an active member of the Greek maritime networks.

SEGREGATIONAL PROCESSES OPERATING WITHIN CLOSE KNIT NETWORKS AND TARGET-ORIENTED COMMUNITIES

The Greek maritime networks are culturally embedded close knit associations sharing a number of common references to a particular ethnicity and an ethos, as well as an involvement in a type of entrepreneurial activity. Taken in their broader sense, they include the educational institutions of the Greek maritime schools. Thus, they could be easily defined as 'ethnic' networks. However, Bowles and Gintis (2004) proposed the concept of 'parochial networks', meaning a specific associative model depicted as 'close knit residential neighborhoods and ethnically linked businesses'. In this context, Bowles and Gintis (2004) put the accent on the binding element of 'trust', which offers a significant comparative advantage over competing economic associations by enhancing the ability to enforce informal contracts needed for the smooth continuation of the 'parochial' businesses. It is important to note here that the networks depicted by Bowles and Gintis (2004) appear as having many common elements with the 'Greek maritime networks' which are closely connected to the communities of practice functioning within the Greek maritime education. An important common characteristic is the significance of 'trust' as a means to assure cohesion among the members of the network. Bowles and Gintis (2004) admit that parochial networks are in fact '*ethnic networks*, defined as sets of agents unified by similarity of one or more ascriptive characteristics (while being) engaged in non-anonymous interactions ...'.

For Bowles and Gintis (2004):

Among the problem-solving capacities of [ethnic or parochial] networks are the powerful contractual enforcement mechanisms made possible by small-scale interactions, notably effective punishing of those who fail to keep promises, facilitated by close social ties, frequent and variegated interactions and the availability of low cost information concerning one's trading partners.

In relation to the above, it should be noted that within the Greek maritime networks, the implementation of the Greek nautical ethos assures that trust will inform all small-scale interactions between nodes. When a cadet, or even a mature seafarer, refuses to behave in conformity with the rules of the particular ethos, he takes the risk of being shunned as an 'outsider'. This 'shunning of outsiders' can be considered as a case of social segregation. Bowles and

Gintis' idea is that 'networks arise in part because people choose to associate with others who are similar to themselves in some salient respect (...). Conversely, people often seek to avoid interactions with those who are different from themselves' (2004). It could be added that cultural affinity in networks not only facilitates the circulation and sharing of information but also offers mutually shared codes for the decoding and understanding of the full meaning contained in the transmitted information. In this case, the fact of sharing the same culture and thus homologous ways of deciphering meaning plays an important role in the effective maximization of the profits of the information-sharing practice. At this point, the importance of the role of the Greek maritime education becomes manifest. It is through the effective functioning of the educational communities of practice operating within the Hellenic Merchant Marine Academy that the homologous ways of deciphering meaning are stabilized and reproduced in the students' cognitive framework and behavioural norms.

INDIVIDUAL HABITUSES AND COLLECTIVE ETHOS AS GENERATORS AND REPRODUCERS OF EDUCATIONAL COMMUNITIES OF PRACTICE

The education and training process at the Merchant Marine Academy provides its students with opportunities of access to learning that is organizationally, socially and culturally situated. Education and training at the Academy is interweaved with the practical technicalities of the professional world of shipping, while constantly informed by a dominant ethos that is (partly) shared by both ends of the transformational experience, the network as employer and (a number amongst) the students' families as reproducers of the labour force. Students, who, thanks to their upbringing, share the core values of the Greek nautical ethos, are better suited to be transformed into seafarers who are well integrated into the profession and willing to stay in it for the entirety of their career. However, sharing the core values of the Greek nautical ethos is not always a matter of clear articulation of rules to follow that is made within a purposeful and rational discourse. The exhibition of compliance with the Greek nautical ethos' values quite often uses the communication channels of non-verbal language (Poyatos, 1983), the adoption of an appropriate mood in specific circumstances, the choice of the right vocabulary (independent of the explicit meaning of the terms used), knowledge of the subtleties of non-official hierarchical arrangements between individuals and groups, the successful management of

the associational game-including a preoccupation with 'taste-sharing' -and the mastering of the art of 'impression management', in Goffman's words, which is capable of establishing an 'interactional *modus vivendi*' (Goffman, 1959) within the craft's everyday life. It is the nature of these instances of communication-and especially their expression as individual dispositions-that makes necessary the use of the concept of habitus in order to better grasp the relation between a collective phenomenon (: ethos) and the agency of persons. In this logic, the analysis of the relations between the educational process, the Greek nautical ethos and the individual habituses of the process's participants becomes a prerequisite for understanding the mechanisms that reproduce a labour force and a network through the mediation of an educational institution.

Edwin Smith (2003) argues that 'the concept of ethos connects with Bourdieu's "habitus" and the notion of situated learning'. For Smith, 'ethos can be defined as an organisation's habitus'. Theorizing on the educational process from 'an ecological perspective', he suggests that 'habituses 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'.

Referring to the Hellenic Merchant Marine Academy, we could say that its ethos is, at least partly, continuously constructed and reconstructed under the decisive influence of its seafarer teachers. Smith's point of view is grounded on his conviction that 'the evolving ethos itself provides developing dispositions and contexts for situated co-learning and participation in communities of practice' (2003). However, the results of the present research indicate that the newly developing dispositions of the young students and cadets are the product of both an apprenticeship and a screening process that filters out the 'unfit' as being less compliant with a set of rather rigid criteria of compliance with the values of the Greek nautical ethos. As this research reveals, a 'situated co-learning' does exist, indeed, although this context-embedded process does not guarantee the positive result of the youngsters' initiation into the dominant version of the professional ethos.

Edwin Smith's (2003) understanding of this question, in the author's own words:

Draws upon Bourdieu (1990) concept of habitus and Lave and Wenger (1998) ideas about communities of practice in an attempt to provide a framework in which the ethos of an educational organisation can be understood as a dynamic tension among several types of ecological factor.

However, what Smith terms 'ethos (...) as a dynamic tension' could be translated as the persistence of cultural heterogeneity in educational settings, for he explains that 'that tension and the ease of resolving it are represented as functions of the degree of cultural homogeneity in the student composition of the organisation and among the relevant external constituencies'. In Smith's view, 'organisations 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 Hellenic Merchant Marine Academy can be taken as such an organization, we could agree that it is continually reconstructing itself 'under the ecological influence' of a number of social institutions 'in the external environment', that latter being the maritime-related professional world and the legal framework for the regulation of shipping that is provided by states and international institutions. There cannot be much doubt that the need to comply with the regulations of the International Maritime Organization and the requirements of shipping-related international treaties such as the STCW (International Convention on Standards of Training, Certification and Watchkeeping for Seafarers), SOLAS, (International Convention for the Safety of Life at Sea) or MARPOL ((short for marine pollution) International Convention for the Prevention of Pollution from Ships) does constitute a serious 'ecological influence' for the Merchant Marine Academy of Greece from the perspective of the accomplishment of its role. Equally, the need to comply with the market's demands (i.e., to educate and train a growing number of 'good Greek seafarers') does represent one more unavoidable 'ecological influence' for the Academy. Nonetheless, its implication for the 'individual students' habituses' is traditionally realized in terms involving a hierarchy of values and dispositions that is detrimental to the 'unfit', the marginal, or the maladaptive.

In the specific cultural setting of this research and as it has emerged through the students' and the mature seafarers' interviews, not all members of the shipping-related professional world share homologous habituses. Instead, those who do share a habitus that is compatible with the Greek nautical ethos' values are the best prepared for an ascending professional career that could lead them to the higher hierarchical positions of the Greek maritime networks. Nonetheless, speaking of the role of individual habituses as constituent of a collective ethos that enhances one's chances of becoming part of a network, it becomes necessary to introduce into the discussion the concept of 'communities of practice', a concept capable of welding all these pieces together.

Smith (2003) argues that 'a more collective dimension (compared with that of habitus) is provided by the idea of communities of practice (...). Habitus and community of practice (...) complement each other in illuminating the widely contested notion of school ethos'. Smith (2003) insists that a school is a community of practice because 'the internal context or communal social organisation [of the educational institution] is also characterised as a community of practice and learning as participation in these communities'. In Smith's (2003) understanding, 'for community of practice theory (...), learning is (...) seen as increasing participation in communities of practice – communities in which teachers (...) are co-learners with the novices'. Nonetheless, the findings of this research show that a community of practice, if we accept Wenger (1998), is not a structured institution such as a school is. It would have been more scrupulous to suggest that a community of practice can indeed emerge within a school's context, provided that the requirements for that as mentioned by Wenger (1998) are effectively met.

As Smith (2003) suggests:

If learning is constructed as participation in a community of practice rather than internalisation of norms (...), then the nature of that community is a crucial factor in the quality of the learning. Thus, in Bourdieu's terms, a critical element in the reproduction of the social order and social stratification is the habitus of the class context through which individuals learn by participating. In this perspective, schools provide one of several communities of practice (...) in which individuals participate, alongside peer groups, families and, increasingly, virtual communities (...).

However, we should keep in mind that learning in Greek maritime education is both constructed as 'participation in a community of practice' and as 'internalisation of norms'. The participation of students and cadets in the shipping-related communities of practice does not mean that an equality-based relationship exists between the different parties. Cadets participate not as equal partners but as hierarchically inferior to their elders and as being under scrutiny and evaluation by the best (i.e., the organisationally fittest) amongst these latter. For that reason, learning in Greek maritime education, although involving a certain participation in a community of practice, is mostly a process of internalisation of norms. Moreover, it is the degree of the successful internalization of these norms

and the non-passive but participative nature of each of the individual internalizations of the dominant norms that opens the gate to a successful professional career and an upward social mobility within the relevant social network. In simpler terms, the most promising candidate amongst the young cadets for a future career in shipping is the one who already possesses a habitus compatible with the core values of the Greek nautical ethos. While it is true that a further development of individual student habituses does occur in the course of their education and training at the Merchant Marine Academy and aboard ship, it is useful to keep in mind that the necessity of an initial compatible disposition is something that emerges throughout the quasi-totality of the accounts reported in this study.

Refocusing our attention on the habitus-ethos-community of a practice relationship, it is useful to cite Smith's understanding of it.

For Smith (2003):

Much recent research into school effects and school effectiveness has used the term 'ethos' but it is not adequately defined. That lack of definition may be resolved by regarding ethos as a special case of habitus/community of practice: a characteristic of a school as described (...) in ecological terms as a complex dynamic interaction of continuous construction and reconstruction of individuals' and institutions' habituses-a perpetual 'construction site'.

For Smith (2000), ethos is a sort of collective habitus of a community of practice. From our point of view and in order to clarify the use of concepts, we would propose an approach that considers the following cognitive and explanatory schema: First, the 'world of Greek shipping' is a network of practice in Brown and Duguid's line of thought, for it is a 'network that links people to others whom they may never get to know but who work on similar practices'. Second, this network is composed of a number of different communities of practice which are geographically localized or, sometimes, solely webbed through kinship and 'trust'-like ties while demonstrating a high degree of spatial mobility on an annual basis. In this view, a shipping-related community of practice may correspond to a traditional *naftotopos* (: an island or coastal town specialising in shipping-related activities) or to a rather nomadic sub-network of kin and 'trusted friends'. Additionally, the Hellenic Merchant Marine Academy itself can be conceived as the site of a community of practice closely linked to the other nodes of the network, although assuring, to an extent, the specific

task of their reproduction. Third, ethos represents at the same time the binding element of the parts composing the communities of practice and the set of criteria that permits to an individual seafarer entry into the community and the entire network. Thus, the Greek nautical ethos assures the cultural homogenization and the cohesion of Greek communities of practice related to shipping, while at the same time assuring the effective screening of the candidates to membership in these communities and the entire network. And finally, habitus is understood as a solely individual set of dispositions to types of action-without presupposing a conscious aiming at ends' (Bourdieu, 1990) -that can facilitate, or deny, the individual's compliance with the constitutive values and prescriptive rules of behaviour that characterise the particular ethos of the Greek maritime-related human agents.

For Smith (2003):

Ethos (...) is constructed through an interaction between the culture mix of teachers, pupils, parents, the local community (...) and the school's official value system (...). It thus contains anthropological and psychological dimensions and includes the qualities of the learning environment, the values, beliefs and principles that are conveyed to the pupils through the actions and behaviours (deliberate and otherwise) of the educators in the school and the habituses brought to the school by pupils and staff and those that emanate from institutions in the external environment (school).

In the above presented synthesis, Smith projects an image of a school's ethos that, although capable of grasping the richness of its constituents, underscores the importance of the conflictually hierarchical character of the learning process. An educational institution like the Hellenic Merchant Marine Academy is not a kind of open parliament where individual agents freely negotiate their equally legitimate values, beliefs and habituses. It is more of a traditional educational institution that functions according to strict hierarchical rules, while valuing conformity to the dominant model of behaviour as well as acceptance of the desired construct of pedagogy, the 'good Greek seafarer'. In other terms, the students are not given the freedom to decide by themselves, or to negotiate with teachers and mentors, which elements of their curriculum (both official and 'hidden') are the most suitable for their personal growth and career development. The fact that many among them do indeed make personal choices

concerning the valuation of the curricula does not result in a renegotiation or modification of these latter. Most of all, their eventual reluctance to comply with the premises of the Greek nautical ethos, a major dimension of the 'hidden' curriculum, can result in their rejection from the group of those who are supposed to be suitable for a career in shipping.

Within the frames of Greek maritime education, the school's ethos is constructed largely by the cultural import of seafarer teachers, of both the Deck Officers' and Engineering Departments and the influence of the professional milieu on students during their educational voyages aboard ships. Here, it would be useful to cite Smith's (2003) understanding of the relations between a school's ethos and the habituses of all agents who have an influence on it.

He suggests that:

where there is a high degree of congruence between institutional ethos and the class habitus of the clientele, (...) students from backgrounds of significantly different habitus may be deterred from seeking entry. That effect is largely independent of any filtering out that may occur by accident or design in selection procedures.

In the case of the Hellenic Merchant Marine Academy, an active promotional campaign on behalf of the institutions involved with maritime education (the Ministry, shipping companies, specialised journals) has assured a continuous flow of new students coming from backgrounds without any connection with the world of shipping. As a result, many apprentice marine officers are vectors of habituses that are divergent from, or even antithetical to, the core values of the Greek nautical ethos. In consequence, the filtering out of the 'unfit' takes place during the students 'rites of passage' period, that is during their 'education and training' experience at the site of the Academy and on board ships.

CONCLUSION

What we are attesting in the specific case of maritime education in Greece is not a form of traditional 'educational exclusion' but a much more synthetic phenomenon that needs to be analysed at many levels. Social segregation as a parallel outcome of technocratic 'improvements' in education is an issue that needs to be addressed in relation to the role and the agency of the social networks that pose as the prospective employers of the human product of the

educational 'improvement' process. It is useful to retain that this process of segregation is presented in official discourses as grounded in meritocratic, or rationally assessed, criteria of compliance with a dominant version of organizational effectiveness and performance. Nonetheless, we should not forget that that latter performance is rated upon a set of criteria that value the conformance to a specific ethos. As a conclusion, we could argue that the reproduction of the Greek nautical ethos through education and practical training, in the way it is provided by the Hellenic Merchant Marine Academy, corresponds to the reproduction of conformity with a precise (sub-) cultural model. This conformity can be read as both a factor enhancing the effectiveness and performance of the Greek maritime networks and a factor capable of inducing modern forms of social segregation.

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