

Greek and Irish trade unions responses to youth unemployment

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Introduction

This paper sets to investigate the responses of the Greek and Irish social actors (trade unions, employers' organizations, public agencies) to the youth unemployment which has severely risen in both countries after the outbreak of the economic crisis (OECD, 2009). The rationale behind the comparative perspective stems from our intention to investigate how the institutional structures and the industrial relations systems of two different European countries affect the formation of their social partners' responses to the economic crisis and to youth unemployment (Gallie and Paugam, 2000) (Katrougalos, 1996). So far the academic literature has been engaged with the interaction between the structures of interest representation and the political economy characteristics of Greece and Ireland in relation to the communication of specific discourses. But, the gap in this literature concerns the absence of an ideological analysis of the discourses of the social actors in order to grasp not only the typical institutionalized relations between them but also the convergence and divergence of their ideological stances. In that respect this paper examines whether and if so how the different national institutional structures differentiate the responses of the social partners and the ideological underpinnings of those discourses.

Literature Review and Research Hypothesis

The variety of capitalism approach has been extensively used in the academic literature as theoretical framework for understanding the social and economic differences across countries. The VoC places its emphasis on the institutional arrangements and configurations in order to explain the development and direction of the political economy of different states. These institutional arrangements include the different national economic institutions such as the financial system, the vocational training and the industrial relations system which offer different opportunities for the development of companies and national economies (Allen, 2004, p: 91). The writers supporting the variety of capitalism approach claim that the strength of institutional arrangements lies in their capacity to facilitate a long-term productive efficiency relied on the coordination and cooperation between the main social actors. According to the variety of capitalism approach the political economies of national states can be categorized as either coordinated market economies (CMEs) or liberal market economies (LMEs). The CMEs are characterized by the coordination of the economy,

the existence of strong cooperative relations between employers and employees and the reliance of firms on non-market relationships to resolve their coordination problems (Bosch, Rubery, Lehndorff, 2007: p: 257). The CMEs are characterised by institutional complementarities which reinforce a strategic cooperation between capital and labour, making them both responsible for the success of this economic and social model (Hall and Soskice, 2001).

On the other hand LMEs are mainly dependent on pursuing short-term profit and opportunities and thus facilitate a radical innovation, including the deregulation of labour markets and the weakening of employee's rights and involvement. Furthermore, LMEs are reliant on market mechanisms for solving their coordination problems. The rationale behind this distinction lies in the fact that the supporters of the variety of capitalism approach place importance on how the institutional arrangements affect the national political economies and their distinctive elements.

The VoC approach as it was firstly elaborated by Hall and Soskice didn't include Greece in the cluster of countries categorized either as LMEs or CMEs. However further research has been conducted on the modelling of the Greek political economy in the lines of the Voc approach. A summary of this research indicates that the Greek political economy has been conceptualized as state capitalist model(SCM) characterized by state-mediation of almost all the economic and social activities (Schmidt 2002), as a Southern European Capitalism (characterized by the extensive regulatory role of the state and increased institutional complementarities directed towards welfare and education (Amable, 2003), and it had also been categorized as Mixed Market economies (MMEs) characterized by organizational stability and institutional complementarities but less coordinated and much fragmented than the CMEs (Molina and Rhodes (2005). The above-mentioned different classifications of the Greek political economy have some similarities and differences. In particular the SCM as categorized by Schmidt is not a distinct model of capitalist economy but rather a model which adopts more of the CMEs elements but is less coordinated and more reliant on the role of the state for coordinating its economic activities. However the relevance and explanatory power of the SCM has been questioned by Molina and Rhodes who categorize Greece as a MME. Specifically the classification of Greece as MME is based on the assumption that the family plays an important role in the provision of social assistance due to the absence of state mediation and welfare provisions.

Featherstone (2008) argues that the VoC approach utilized in the Greek cases indicates the possibilities and limitations that the internal structure of collective representation and the rational economic self-interests of the key actors place on the Greek reform agenda. According to his analysis the Greek case exemplifies the constraints imposed on the reform policies by rational interests generated through institutional complementarities traditionally and historically rooted in the Greek social and employment system. Featherstone's conviction that the domestic discourses of the key

political actors are defined by their privileged position and the fear of losing those privileges is a key explanatory variable of his analysis for the high difficulty in bringing about reforms in the Greek system. In addition the VoC theoretical framework expects to find patterns of social actors interests due to institutional complementarities. One example illustrated by Featherstone is that the limited welfare provision in Greece is the reason that the social actors have been traditionally embraced a job security discourse.

According to many academic counts Ireland has been classified as a typical LME country where the market mechanisms play the predominant role in coordinating the economic and social relationships of the system (Hall and Gingerich, 2004, p: 453). Although Ireland has not been as strong LME country as the USA or United Kingdom, however its classification as LMEs has been widely accepted (Hall and Soscice, 2003, p: 244). Hence, the dominant social and employment characteristics of the LMEs, have been broadly attributed to Ireland. According to academic accounts Ireland seems to include a competition and flexibility system whose intensity facilitate the incorporation of radical innovation in the Irish training and innovation systems (Crouch 2005). Research by Hardiman has showed that the Irish training and skills formation policy verifies the generic postulates and expectations of the VoC theory as the general skills development and the complementary usage of conditional and targeted welfare policies are both in line with the LMEs usual trajectory (Hardiman, 2009, p: 23).

If we take seriously the VoC assumptions about the employment and social complementarities of the Greek and Irish systems, the following research hypothesis can be made. The Greek and Irish youth employment debates will have considerable differences: The Greek institutional complementarities will support the protection and security of employees as Featherstone proposition assumes and the Irish complementarities due to their liberal tradition will allow for a more pro-flexibility and deregulation youth employment discourse. Thus, if the Greek social partners differ in their discourses from their Irish counterparts due to the Greek institutional complementarities such as the traditionally coordinated and protectionist system of employment and social relations, then the possibility of the VoC to explain the national differences will be taken seriously.

One issue which has been broadly discussed in the academic and political debates is whether the political and economic reforms can be more easily implemented in some countries than others (Featherstone, 2008). This issue is relevant to our research due to the policy reforms which are implemented in many European countries, including Greece and Ireland. The political environment within which these reforms take place and the political responses from the main social actors is expected to influence the reform attempts and the debates of the political and social actors. The most important issue though is how these political responses are affected and where the

explanation of those responses can be found. The current research assumes two factors as crucial for the direction and outcome of the national debates: the political party system and the degree of conflict or compromise between the social partners. According to some assumptions made in the literature, the Greek and the Irish political systems and political ideologies diverge considerably, making explicable why Greek and Irish responses to the governments measures have been so different (O'Regan, 2010). The above reasoning is based on the idea that the Irish political system has been relied on the social partnership approach which brought about a relatively peaceful coexistence and agreement between Irish trade unions and employers organizations. On the other hand the Greek political system didn't ever encompass the principles of the social partnership approach and it has a more ideologically divided political system. If we are to translate the above assumption in the youth employment debates, it could be argued that the Greek social partners find less common ground for agreement than their Irish counterparts. Even though the actual direction and content of those debates will be part of the next section, it can be pointed out that the differences between the Irish and Greek youth employment debates can be an indicator of the different political environment under which the youth employment reforms in both countries take place. According to the central idea of this argument the ideological division of the political system allows the class interests to be expressed and organized through political parties and trade unions (O'Regan, 2010). Thus the Greek trade unions are expected to accommodate a predominantly 'class analysis' or conflicting vocabulary whereas the employers organizations a more neoliberal one. On the other hand the Irish social partnership is supposed to absorb the different class interests and incorporate them into a discourse of dialogue and mutual gain.

Methods

The data basis of this research is based on interviews conducted by the author with employers' organizations, trade unions, NGOs and public agencies of both Greece and Ireland. A round of 15 interviews has been conducted in Greece. The interviewees include representatives from a wide range of organizations. Employers' Organizations: Hellenic Federation of Enterprises (SEV), National Confederation of Hellenic Commerce (ESSE), Hellenic Confederation of Professionals, Craftsman and Merchants (GSVEE). Trade Unions: Greek General Confederation of Labour (G.S.E.E.), All workers Militant Front (PAME). State and Governments Agencies: Greek Manpower Employment Organization, Greek Ministry of Labour, Economic and Social Council of Greece (OKE), General Secretary for Youth. Research Centres: Foundations for Economic and Industrial Research (IOBE), National Centre for Social Research (EKKE). A round of 11 interviews has been conducted in Ireland. The interviewees include representatives from a wide range of organizations.

The social partners included in this research are the following: Trade Unions: Irish Congress of Trade Unions (ICTU), Services Industrial Professional and Technical Union (SIPTU). Non-Governmental Organizations: National Youth Council of Ireland (NYCI), Irish National Organization of Unemployed (INOU). Employers' Associations: Irish Business and Employers Association (IBEC), Irish small and medium enterprises association (ISME). Public Agencies: Department of Education and Skills (DES), Irish National Training and Employment Authority (FAS), National Economic and Social Council (NESCC), Dublin Employment Pact (DEP). Independent Research Institutes: The Economic and Social Research Institute (ESRI). Also a various range of documents have been collected and analysed for the purposes of this research. Documents and other material include: Annual Economic and Employment Reports, Pamphlets, Press Releases and Speeches, Trade Unions newspapers, Official Employment Legislations, Labour Market Reviews.

The main technique which is used for analysing the empirical data collected in the field work is that of content analysis. In this research content analysis is carried out through the software Nvivo. By using Nvivo the categorization of data has been organized around identifiable themes-topics based on the theoretical assumptions and research hypotheses developed in other parts of this research.

Irish case

The results of our analysis have identified the main positions of the Irish social partners on the issue of youth unemployment. The analysis of those positions has illustrated that elements of the neoliberal discourse have predominantly characterized the positions and ideas of the majority of the social partners (mainly employers and public agencies). The neoliberal elements which prevailed in the discourses of those organizations include the reduction of wages, the reduction of welfare benefits, the tightening up of welfare provisions, privatizations and tax reductions. The effect of the crisis didn't appear to signify a shift in the discourse of those organizations, but the economic recession pushed them to more radical neoliberal positions. At the same time the analysis of the data has indicated that the Irish trade unions have embodied elements of both the neoliberal and the social Europe discourses. In particular, as shown earlier, whereas their economic proposals have relied on the economic principles of Social Europe inspired by the demand-side management, their employment and social discourses have embraced the supply-side individualized elements of the neoliberal discourse. In the same line the wage and labour market proposals of the unions epitomize the neoliberal elements as the connection between wage cuts and competitiveness and the absence of labour market protection proposals show. In the same line the other social partners (NGOs) in Ireland have produced ambivalent proposals where some elements of the discourse have been aspired by social Europe positions and some others from more individualistic supply-side theories.

Despite the collapse of the social partnership after the economic crisis, the relations between the social actors are characterized by agreement and consensus. As argued earlier, the analysis of the positions of the social actors on the seven thematic categories confirms the view that the industrial relations system in Ireland even after the crisis has more consensual traits than adversarial ones. The social actors' agreement over a variety of issues such as activation, labour market flexibility, skills formation and wage issues verify the above claim.

The prevalence of consensus in the Irish youth unemployment debate is reinforced by the tradition of social partnership which prevailed in Ireland since 1987. The breaking of the social partnership has dismantled the institutionalized forums of social partnership but it has not altered the consensus tradition of the Irish industrial relations. The outbreak of the crisis has generated some new elements in the discourses of the social partners but the consensus over a variety of issues such as activation, social welfare, wage policy and skill formation remains dominant in Irish unemployment discourse. However, there were some issues such as welfare cuts, austerity measures, public sector reforms where more disagreement was observed. Nevertheless, the discourses of the trade unions and NGOs didn't set a new economic and social model but they rather proposed the adoption of a set of measures in order to accomplish the objectives agreed by employers. Overall the youth unemployment debate in Ireland shows that the Irish social partners act in a highly trusty and cooperative environment.

Greek case

The main dimensions of the youth unemployment debate in Greece demonstrate that the Social Europe agenda main postulates determine political proposals for its resolution. On the annual conference of GSEE the president of the union declared that the most crucial economic and social objective of the European integration should be defined by the main principles of the European Social model (34o Pan-Hellenic Conference of GSEE, 2009, p: 2). According to the President of GSEE these principles include the distribution of wealth in a fair and equal way and the avoidance of inequalities and unfairness in favour of a minority of wealthy people (34o Pan-Hellenic Conference of GSEE, 2009, p: 7).

The youth unemployment debate produced by trade unions resemble the main postulates of the Social Europe agenda by highlighting the importance of well-planned training and educational schemes funded by the State in tackling youth unemployment and improving young people' human capital. Also the emphasis on a new growth and employment model oriented towards combining

employment and economic growth shows that the Greek social partners have considerably incorporated the core Social Europe agenda into their proposals.

As shown earlier, in contrast to the social-democratic orientation of the first position, the PAME discourse focused explicitly on the class nature of the capitalist system and the exploitation and inequalities which are inherent elements of that system. In line with the socialist ideas, PAME rejects the potential of humanizing the capitalist system through regulatory and institutional frameworks and advocates the inherent contradictions and exploitative nature of capitalism. As indicated on table 3, the unequal distribution of wealth and the gradual impoverishment of working people are inextricable elements of the socialist ideology which feature constantly in the employment discourse generated by PAME. In the same way the resolution of the capitalist contradictions and the workers' exploitation proposed by PAME adopts the main economic and social objectives of the socialist ideas. In particular the socialization of the means of production and the overthrow of the capitalist system through class struggle, inherent elements of the socialist thinking, compromise the dominant elements of PAME's strategy.

The central planning of the economy and the workers' control over the organization and management of the production and distribution of the social wealth are central theoretical and practical postulates of the socialist thinking which are widely utilized in the policy proposals and strategic vision of PAME. The militant stance of PAME is also confirmed by the stance of the Union in relation to the current labour market reforms and the applied economic policies. Specifically PAME suggests the heavy taxation of capital profits (by 45%), the implementation of direct taxes to big firms and sanctions to businesses which owe contributions to the Social Security Funds (PRESS CONFERENCE OF PAME IN THESSALONIKI, 2011). PAME also disagrees with the proposals of GSEE for a combination of employment and economic growth through improving the competitiveness of the Greek economy and investing in innovation and green projects. Being consistent with the socialist strategy, PAME opposes the possibility for combining workers' prosperity with capital's profitability and accuses GSEE for betraying worker's interests by submitting to those social democratic principles. Also in contradiction to the stance hold by GSEE, PAME disputes the possibility of reconciliation between workers and employers interests and calls for rejection of social dialogue and class compromise mainly adopted by GSEE. Instead of social compromise and social dialogue with employers, the radical opposition to the austerity measures and employers strategies through organized resistance has been put forward by PAME as its main strategy. The radical trade unionism, informed by socialist ideas, adopted by PAME, is also substantiated in its position on the collective agreements and relations with the other employers organizations. Whereas GSEE has praised the

positive impact of the social dialogue and consensus bargaining on workers employment and social rights, PAME has practically resisted social dialogue and accused GSEE for selling off workers' rights through consensus agreements.

The radical and socialist standpoint of PAME is also materialized in its discourse regarding the employment and social rights of workers. The flexible employment relations and the violation of sectoral agreements as measures for overcoming the consequences of the economic crisis and avoiding job losses have been disapproved by PAME both in theoretical and practical levels. The theoretical objection is related with the class-oriented nature of the union which dictates the rejection of any measure which compromises or undermines workers' rights in order to help businesses to overcome the economic crisis and increase their profitability. The practical objection is related with the participation of PAME in industrial actions organized in workplaces (ongoing steelworkers strike) and its refusal to engage in consensus bargaining and accept a trade-off between wages and layoffs. In tandem, the claim that radical and socialist ideas have been incorporated into PAME employment discourse is validated by its platform of social security demands which include significant increases in unemployment benefits, minimum wages and pensions.

Also, in line with Social Europe agenda trade unions, the employment public agency and SMEs recognized the need for comprehensive labour market institutions and social services structures which facilitate the integration of young people into the labour market and their protection during unemployment spells. The activation of young people through employment schemes and vocational training was a crucial element of the Greek youth unemployment discourse which shows that the Social Europe policies for comprehensive active labour market have been taken seriously by the Greek trade unions. Furthermore, trade unions and small businesses associations were critical of the model of the unfettered free market capitalism which caused the economic and employment problems experienced all over the world.

Besides, many actors produced a very critical anti-neoliberalism discourse and accused the Greek governments for ignoring the social and employment needs of employees and serving the economic interests of big corporations. According to one respondent from the Economic and Social Council, instead of maintaining and promoting social peace and employment growth through an anthropocentric Keynesian type capitalism, the Greek governments supported the interests of wealthy people at the disastrous expense of working and especially young people. The Social Europe agenda also stands out in the demands of GSEE for fairer, less unequal and more distributive social policies which provide more social justice and reduce the wealth and social inequalities produced by

the capitalist system. Also in line with the fundamental principles of Social Europe agenda all the social partners which supported the specific discourse connected the competitiveness of the economy with the employment growth and the improvement of the social welfare.

Our findings illustrated that the Social Europe and neoliberal discourses dominated the youth unemployment debate and coexisted in the separate discourses of each social actor. Interestingly, some of the basic dimensions of the neoliberal discourse (reduction of overall labour cost) appeared in the trade union discourse whereas central features of the Social Europe agenda (dissent wages, social protection) emerged in the small and medium employers' discourses. The specific phenomenon was correlated with the effect of the economic crisis in the reformulation of employers economic interests and demands and their relations with each other. However, a certain inconsistency was observed in the discourses of the small and medium organizations as their rhetoric was far more conflict-oriented towards SEV than the positions they adopted during the social dialogue.

The results of our research have elucidated the coexistence between consensus and cooperation in the Greek youth employment debate. The findings of our research have also verified that the economic crisis has been a significant factor behind the generation of the current youth employment discourses and of the interplay between cooperation and conflict. A demonstrative example of the above tendency is the relation between the big and small organizations where the pre-crisis consensus environment has been replaced by a more conflict and disagreement discourse. According to our findings, the division between big and small employer's organizations is the outcome of the economic crisis as before the crisis there was a general agreement between those organizations. The division between big and small and medium organizations (SMS) seems to derive by the fact that the economic crisis has affected in different ways the big and small businesses and therefore has redefined their interests. Specifically, the small and medium businesses are hardest hit by the economic crisis as many of them are closing down or are in danger of going bust. For that reason the flexibilization of the young labour market and the reduction of minimum wages for young people are not of a priority for the representatives of those businesses as the reduction of labour cost reduces the available consumer spending and the flexibilization of the labour market doesn't help their immediate need for survival. On the other hand, big businesses support the flexibilization of the labour market and the further reduction of labour cost as through those measures businesses can increase their profitability and upgrade their position.

At the same time some continuity has also been observed in the post-crisis Greek employment debate as the participation of employees in social dialogue institutions and the strong trust in the

significance of the later to generate positive results is also an indication of the continuous cooperative direction of the Greek industrial relations. An additional element of our findings which explains the complexity of the Greek youth employment discourse is the existence of the communist-backed trade union in the Greek political and societal developments. Specifically PAME has increased its influence in the Greek trade union movement and its anti-capitalist and radical discourse has affected the nature and direction of the trade union discourse in all levels including that of youth unemployment.

Conclusions

The youth unemployment discourses of the Irish social actors illustrated that consensus and agreement have been the dominant features. The analysis in the previous chapter showed briefly the main explanatory factors of the consensual agreement between the Irish social actors. Due to the tradition of social partnership the Irish social actors embodied a dominantly consensus youth employment discourse, accepting fundamental elements of the neoliberal agenda. Despite the official breaking down of the social partnership institutions, the Irish social actors agreed on the majority of the employment themes which constitute the theoretical-analytical framework of this research. The analysis of the ideological underpinnings of the social actors youth unemployment discourses showed that the neoliberal thinking was incorporated by employers, trade unions and public agencies in the majority of the employment themes under consideration. The discourses of the Irish social actors showed that youth unemployment remained focus on the technical aspects of youth unemployment without engaging with more politicised aspects of youth unemployment. Thus, issues of skills formation, vocational training, apprenticeships and activation policies dominated the discourses of the social parties. On the other hand, the more political themes of labour market flexibility, welfare benefits, minimum wages and economic policies didn't cause particular disagreement among the social partners despite some small in scale differences and criticisms by the trade unions and the NGOs. The acceptance of the basic components of the Irish social and employment system characterized the discourses and debates of the social actors. The pre-crisis domination of a consensus social environment determined the trajectory of the youth unemployment discourses as our research indicates. The national agreements signed between the social actors since 1981 through the institutionalization of the social partnership produced a cooperative industrial relations environment in relation to youth unemployment.

On the other hand, the Greek youth unemployment discourses, has followed a different trend. Although consensual elements were found in the social actors' youth unemployment discourses, however, more disagreements and contentions were observed compared with the Irish case. The

institutionalized forms of social dialogue and the consensus bargaining in national level assisted in the development of agreement and cooperation between the social partners over a range of issues. However, in contrast with the Irish depoliticized youth unemployment discourses, the Greek social actors adopted an approach combining consensual and adversarial features. The dominant issues of the Greek youth unemployment debate were centred on the impotent position of young unemployed in the labour market and the potential exploitation and unfair treatment of young workers. The Greek debate diverged from the Irish one due to the development of a range of different ideologically-informed youth unemployment discourses. Thus, although issues of technical significance were also raised in the Greek youth unemployment discourse such as the limited evaluation of programs or the lack of supervision mechanism, however the issue of youth unemployment was located into the broader debate of economic policy and political economy. Thus, the proposals of the social actors (mainly unions) recognized that a whole restructuring of the social and employment model is required if youth unemployment was to be resolved.

The discourse of the Irish trade unions, in line with the traditional Irish labour movement stance, lacks a class-based approach and therefore the positions and ideas of the unions are absent of class references or contestation stances. In essence the Irish unions (especially in the interviews) developed a discourse centred on the ideas of national competitiveness without references to distributional or equality matters. As the unions representatives admitted the unions strategy is pragmatic and realistic and comprehends the financial and economic difficulties that the country is facing. The specific discourse shows that even though unions have rejected the size and extent of the austerity measures they have also conceded the necessity for implementing fiscal measures to restore the economic and fiscal turbulence. In the same line the other organizations (especially employers) have produced a consensus discourse in relation to their relations with the unions. Although there was recognition that some issues (minimum wages) have divided employers and unions, employers were of the view that consensus is the dominant element of the economic and employment debate in Ireland.

As referred earlier, the identity of the Irish union is a determining factor in relation to the strategies and policies put forward by the unions. Our research confirms the results of previous research according to which Irish trade unions lack a class-oriented approach (D' Acre and Turner, 2011, p: 167). The specific characteristic affects the orientation of the employment and economic discourses of the unions. Specifically the lack of references on issues of exploitation, class-capital conflict or structurally-determined social problems signifies the pluralistic and business oriented discourse of the Irish unions. The Irish trade unions espoused a pragmatic strategy the main pillars of which

centred on competitiveness, skills formation for the needs of the economy and wage moderation. The absence of radical elements in the discourse of the union shows that the tradition of social partnership has affected the strategies of the unions even after the outbreak of the economic crisis when the material preconditions for consensus don't exist anymore.

On the other hand, the existence of a strong communist backed trade union in Greece has important repercussions in relation to the direction of the youth employment discourse. The strong impact of that Union and its anti-capitalistic political agenda contributes significantly to the production of conflictual elements in the youth employment debate. Specifically, whereas the GSEE leadership adopted a more consensus youth employment discourse where cooperation, dialogue and understanding were the most dominant characteristics, respondents from PAME produced a predominantly conflictual youth debate characterized by radical ideological elements and proposals for resistance. The anti-capitalist nature of PAME and its strong opposition to the social democracy discourse produced by GSEE is one of the most characteristic features of the Greek trade unionism. As mentioned earlier the essence of their dispute lies in the fundamental distinction between the demand for a more anthropocentric type of capitalism proposed by GSEE and the radical overthrow of the capitalist system advocated by the communist party-backed trade union.

Based on the theoretical assumptions of the VOC literature, this research has envisaged that the diverse political economies of Greece and Ireland will produce different youth unemployment discourses. Specifically, our hypothesis set in the beginning of the paper was that the Irish liberal market economy (LME) will direct the youth unemployment debate towards a more neoliberal trajectory, whereas the Greek Mediterranean type of capitalism will produce a discourse less oriented towards the market and more inclined towards state protection and intervention.

The results of our analysis have shown that the Irish political economy characteristics such as deregulation, flexible labour market and pro-business economic policies have contributed to the production of neoliberal inspired youth unemployment discourses. In particular central features of the Irish youth employment policies such as the reduction of minimum wages for young employees, the high flexibility in the labour market and the obligations-based welfare benefits system have produced a highly pro-liberal institutional environment within which the discourses of the social partners are developed. As the findings of this research show the construction of the youth unemployment discourses has been influenced by the neoliberal economy characteristics of the Irish political economy. Specifically, the Irish social actors are located in a political economy system where key elements of the neoliberal ideology have been already implemented and embedded into the identity of the Irish system. Thus, the Irish case illustrated that pro-neoliberal legacy of the Irish

system has affected the choices and strategies of the social actors in relation to a range of issues. As the example of youth unemployment shows the neoliberal policies for youth unemployment have been taken for granted by the social actors due to the embeddedness of those policies in the institutional and politico-economic structure of the Irish system. Therefore, the adherence of the social actors to the neoliberal policies and the taken-for granted status of the later are related with the establishment of those policies as indispensable elements for the advancement of the Irish economy. Thus, the need for flexibility in the youth labour market, the connection between benefits (rights) and activation (obligation), the goal of attracting foreign investments through competitive wage policies have not been disputed by the social actors but they have rather been considered as necessary and established norms of the employment and social system.

On the other hand the Greek political economy is characterized by regulation of the labour market, provision of unconditional social provision (limited though), state role in the economy and more protection-oriented system (mainly through the role of family). These political economy characteristics have been reproduced in the discourses and positions of the Greek social actors (mainly trade unions and some public agencies) in relation to youth unemployment. In contrast to the liberal youth unemployment discourses of the Irish system, the Greek youth unemployment debate has produced discourses and strategies which reflect the embodied institutional characteristics of the Mixed Market Economy (MMEs). Specifically, despite the recent neoliberal policies implemented in Greece, the discourses of the Greek social actors reflect the political economy characteristics as these were established before the economy crisis. As the findings of this research show, the establishment of regulation mechanisms (protection in the labour market) and the regulation of the market by the state, have influenced the trajectory of the youth unemployment discourses. The social actors have embraced a discourse oriented towards protection in the labour market, provision of benefits as a social right and state-driven regulation of the economy, verifying the assumption of our research that the political economy differences between the two countries will account for their different employment discourses. Although institutional change has already occurred in the Greek system due to the economic crisis, however the legacy of a more social-security and protection oriented system generates tendencies of a pro-regulation youth unemployment debate at least compared with Ireland. It is worth mentioning that Greek social actors have generated more politicized youth unemployment discourses and positions also due to the shock therapy nature of the employment and economic reforms in Greece. In other words, whereas the Irish social actors as mentioned earlier have incorporated the neoliberal policies in a course of twenty years of neoliberal restructuring, in Greece the shock therapy nature of the

reforms and the legacy of a mixed market economy have produced a more contested and politicized youth unemployment discourse.

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