The social aftermath of economic disaster: Karl Polanyi, countermovements in action, and the Greek crisis

Abstract
The economic crisis in Greece resulted in high unemployment and the dismantling of social protection policies. How did newly-unemployed working-class people respond to rapid downward socioeconomic mobility? I trace these issues through the study of one working class community in Athens over 2012-13. Since the onset of the crisis, my informants became excluded from both market-provided income and state-provided welfare services, thereby experiencing a simultaneous drop in living standards, loss of social status, and debasement of their symbolic construction of reality. To respond to these pressures, they relied on a combination of material survival strategies, the reconfiguration of social resources, and the reconstruction of cultural imaginaries. To explain these findings, the article draws on Karl Polanyi’s analysis of countermovements to marketization and commodification. I argue in favour of augmenting the definition of countermovements, emphasising the cultural aspects of social protection, and grounding analyses in local-level phenomena and their interactions with the macro-institutional context. This reading of Polanyi’s work seeks to integrate many moving—and potentially contradictory—parts into a unified framework of societal responses to social dislocation.