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Introduction to the Special Issue: Everyday Self-Employment

(To appear in *American Behavioral Scientist*)

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Abstract

A “partial renaissance” of self-employment in labor markets of the global North has attracted policy concern within national, supranational, and global arenas, yet sociological thought has been somewhat slower to respond to this phenomenon. In response, this special issue focuses on everyday self-employment among workers drawn from countries across the world. The collection of articles in this volume originated, in part, from a recent symposium that took place at City, University of London, which highlighted the contribution of sociology and cognate disciplines to the study of self-employment. The volume considers the social and structural forces that condition this economic activity as an ideology and practice, as well as the constraints and opportunities for its maintenance and reproduction. It also examines the everyday lives of self-employed workers and in particular the ways in which self-employment is experienced across a range of geographical, occupational, and industrial contexts, and with regard to social categories including race, class, nationality, and gender. As neoliberal subjects, we are increasingly required to inhabit an entrepreneurial self. As such, a sociological understanding of the global patterns and everyday experiences of self-employment—or entrepreneurialism as practice—and the cultural legitimations associated with this oft-celebrated and aspirational economic activity are essential to a critical understanding of the economy and society. What are the current national and international trends in self-employment? What characteristics distinguish entrepreneurs from small-business owners or self-employed workers? If the image of an entrepreneur is an economically mobile rugged individualist, how do social relationships shape entrepreneurialism among transnational migrants or dependent visa holders? Is financial remuneration or maximizing profit always the primary goal, or are the self-employed from different social locations motivated by other, nonpecuniary benefits, such as spiritual fulfillment? Might vulnerable populations, such as undocumented

immigrants, have the less lofty goal of basic survival? How is self-employment organized across different occupations? Can self-employment function as a strategy of collective resistance or subversion? The contributors in this volume often challenge mainstream views of self-employment and entrepreneurship to reveal the complexity and scope of self-employed activity; their perspectives provide new insights for researchers and policy- makers regarding the function of self-employment in a changing economy and society. This introduction initiates a discussion of the central debates in the study of self-employment and presents a brief synopsis of the articles in this volume.

Introduction

The global face of self-employment is undergoing significant change. While almost half of the workers in the world remain self-employed (World Bank, 2017), the number is declining, reducing from 53% to 45.7% in the 10 years to 2017 (World Bank, 2017). This reduction is particularly due to a decrease in the Global South, while for more than three decades, there has been a "partial renaissance" in self-employment in the OECD (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development) countries (OECD in Cranford, Fudge, Tucker, & Vosko, 2005, p. 5). Sociological analysis emerging from the Anglophone "West" has, however, tended to focus on the formal employment relation as the norm, while self-employment as a form of income generation is persistently framed as a diversion from Eurocentric, masculinized norms of standard employment. Even within the more developed countries, there is, however, considerable variety. In OECD countries, for example, rates vary from just 6.4% in the United States to 51.3% in Colombia (OECD, 2018).

In the context of rising policy interest within national, supra-national, and global institutions, sociological theory has been somewhat remiss in responding to and analyzing this changing phenomenon. Earlier, rapid rises in self-employment in the Global North in the 1980s engendered a flourishing of sociological commentary (c.f. Cromie & Hayes, 1988; Goffee & Scase, 1983; Light & Bonacich, 1988/1991; Steinmetz & Wright, 1989; Waldinger, Aldrich, & Ward, 1990). Within some approaches, self-employment is conceived as inherently "entrepreneurial." To describe a person, group, organization, or economy as "entrepreneurial" implies creativity, growth, and a positive labor-market effect. The entrepreneur is the

archetype of the American dream (Valdez, 2011, 2016). Yet where "entrepreneurialism" is defined indirectly as self-employment, or individuals who work on their own account with no employees (Rath & Kloosterman, 2000), it is measured using individuals' or groups' self-employed activity or national self-employment rates (c.f. Carter, 2011; Jones, Mascarenhas-Keyes, & Ram, 2012; Rada & Taylor, 2004). Many advocates recognize, however, that self-employment is a poor proxy for entrepreneurialism (Bjuggren, Johansson, & Stenkula, 2012). This is because self-employment involves considerable heterogeneity (Cranford et al., 2005), a point picked up on and developed by Bögenhold in this Special Issue. Meanwhile, and notwithstanding near-universal political support for the figure of the "entrepreneur," critical studies of entrepreneurialism have emerged from both business (Watson, 2012) and sociological (Valdez, 2016) traditions.

For many, self-employment is marked as much by insecurity, precariousness, and inconsistency of income as by agency, autonomy, and independence. What's more, self-employment encompasses diverse activities, structural relationships and outcomes, many of which confer little economic benefit on the individual or society or fall short of a characterization consistent with innovation or creativity. Various typologies have attempted to distinguish types of arrangements within self-employment. For example, the ILO (Williams and Lapeyre, 2017) distinguishes between employers, own-account workers, members of producer cooperatives, and contributing family workers.

Self-employment is also not a fixed category and is contingent on changing structural relationships. The past decade of global economic crisis and contraction has had variable impacts on self-employment, with at least three patterns emerging. First, patterns in the *number* of people engaged in self-employments are changing globally. While overall rates of self-employment across the world are declining, the number of self-employed workers in the OECD countries is increasing (Meager, 2016), suggesting something of a convergence between the majority and the minority worlds, superficially at least. But, even within the global North there are divergent patterns. For instance, while in the mid-1980s United States and United Kingdom, rates of formal self-employment were comparable, recent changes mean that today the U.S. self-employment rate is below half of that of the United Kingdom (OECD, 2000, 2018).

Second, self-employment has emerged in new spaces, new occupations and industries, and taken new forms, most notably coordination by digital platforms (Huws & Joyce, 2016). A steady trickle of research has focused on specific aspects of self-employment, including “disguised wage work” or “false self-employment” and the rise of the “gig economy” and “contracting” (Behling & Harvey, 2015; Cruz, Hardy, & Sanders, 2017), as well as the role of self-employment within particular sectors, especially the creative industries (Eikhof & Haunschild, 2006). That said, self-employment remains disproportionately concentrated, not in “new” areas, but either in “traditionally” petit bourgeois sectors or in those where higher than average rates of self-employment are long-standing (d’Arcy & Gardiner, 2014).

Third, a lack of clarity persists in relation to legal definitions of self-employment. Indeed, although self-employment is often defined legalistically, based on employment or taxation law, this leaves considerable room for ambiguity, with large numbers, the majority in some regions, who are “marginally” or “informally” self-employed, operating on the borders of legal regulation. The potential (mis)classification of workers in dependent employment relationships as self-employed has attracted not only attention from sociolegal scholars (Freedland & Kountouris, 2011; Fudge, 2012) but also consternation from the European Commission and the International Labour Organization, and appears to be gaining visibility in countries of the Global North, in part due to the association of dependent self-employment with the growing “gig economy” and concentration in industries including the construction and sex industries (Cruz et al., 2017; Forde et al., 2017). For these workers “self-employed status” may be little more than a device to reduce total taxes paid by the firms and the workers involved (Cranford et al., 2005, p. 5). Yet, historical accounts indicate that the concept and classification of self-employment have a relatively short history and that it has always suffered from imprecision and a lack of clarity (Dale, 1986; Deakin, 2001).

The Present Volume

Sociological analyses of self-employment make clear that self-employed labor relations affect and are affected by the lived experience of work, the spaces, and times within which work is conducted and by workers’ relationships with others (Cohen, 2010; Craig, Powell, & Cortis, 2012). Self-employed work may rely on, or be refracted through, particular histories or practices of class, immigration, race,

nationality and ethnicity (Romero & Valdez, 2016; Sanghera, 2002; Valdez, 2011). Additionally, self-employment is gendered, in form and in the narratives used to explain it, for instance, in the rise of “mumtrepreneurs” and “fempreneurs” (Ekinsmyth, 2011; Rouse, Treanor, & Fleck, 2013), and in self-employed workers’ access to familial resources (Marlow, Henry, & Carter, 2009) and inheritance (Valdez, 2016). Similarly, self-employment practices vary with worker age and over the life course (Burchell, Coutts, Hall, & Pye, 2015; Mallett & Wapshott, 2015; McKie, Biese, & Jyrkinen, 2013). Yet despite increasing acknowledgement of the variety of industries, work relationships, and economic outcomes within which self-employment occurs, as well as the interdependence of micro-, meso-, and macrolevel forces that constrain or facilitate this activity, there has been surprisingly little attention paid to self-employment per se, in the past 25 years.

It is not our aim to add to the contested measurement of self-employment or to develop new typologies. Instead, our focus is on the comparative and everyday experiences of self-employed work and workers in a range of geographical, occupational, and industrial contexts. We seek to reveal the role of overlooked social relationships, nonpecuniary goals, noneconomic policies and structural shifts in the larger economy and society on conditions of self-employment, locally and globally. The volume opens with the work of Dieter Bögenhold, who applies a macro-level comparative analysis to the study of self-employment to reveal its complexity. Rather than simply equating self-employment with entrepreneurship, or using them interchangeably, Bögenhold centers his analysis on the “self-employment” worker category itself, in an effort to expose the diverse patterns and trends that are intrinsic to this labor force activity. His analysis reveals that the category of self-employment encompasses a range of formal and informal activities that may condition economic mobility, stagnation, or decline, and which vary internationally and by gender. This article reveals the great heterogeneity that constitutes this form of economic action, as well as its relationship to wage-work, and, importantly, provides a necessary context from which to consider variations in self-employment activity presented in the cases that follow.

Burchell and Coutts explore the issue of job quality among self-employed people, focusing specifically on young workers in the developing world and using the ILO’s School-to-Work Transition survey. They find that self-employment is frequently less a positively chosen employment relation than one of the only realistic ways to generate

an income, and take to task constructions of self-employment as inherently entrepreneurial or consisting of more autonomy or higher quality work. In doing so, they generate evidence to fill an important lacuna, since job quality surveys have largely tended to focus on high-income countries and have largely not addressed self-employment, particularly in countries in the majority South. Emphasizing the difference between objective and subjective criteria, they also identify a divergence between the seeming advantages of employee status when judged using objective criteria and young people's own perspectives, in which they tend to articulate the benefits of self-employment.

With attention to macro-level processes, and against the traditional immigrant entrepreneurship paradigm, which contends that meso-level, immigrant networks provide resources based on group affiliation that facilitate enterprise, You and Zhou investigate how the economic and political landscape in China shapes Chinese migrants' small-business ownership in the United States. Chinese immigrant (predominantly female)–owned nail salons are brick-and-mortar establishments that are located in the secondary sector of the economy. Nail salons straddle the formal and informal economies, as business owners must be licensed and operate under government regulations, but at the same time, co-ethnic employees are generally hired informally and paid low wages, often under the table. You and Zhou maintain that Chinese nail salon owners in New York City are engaged in a form of simultaneous embeddedness, whereby market conditions and immigration policies in the home country affect immigrant business in the host country. This study challenges the notion that immigrant entrepreneurs are motivated by a cultural orientation or collectivist ideology toward enterprise, in favor of an approach that identifies transnational forces as shaping immigrant/ethnic enterprise in the United States. In keeping with You and Zhou, Pallavi Banerjee contends that immigrant entrepreneurship among South Asian dependent visa holders has less to do with a cultural proclivity toward entrepreneurship and more do to with structural forces that restrict their labor in an economy that is affected by immigration policy. As dependent visa holders—the spouses of legal permanent residents who hold work visas—Banerjee's interlocutors are not legally allowed to work. Consequently, they engage in informal and subversive self-employment, an activity that reflects intersections of nativity, race, and class, and is related to prior work or sociocultural experiences, such as the former dancer who teaches children to perform, or the mother who runs an underground childcare center out her home. Banerjee's rich

qualitative study makes it clear that the benefits of self-employment for South Asian migrants have less to do with the pecuniary rewards of entrepreneurship and more to do with the nonpecuniary benefits associated with engaging in an illegal or subversive work arrangement that challenges state-imposed dependency.

Whereas the aforementioned studies focus on immigrant entrepreneurship among legal permanent residents, Valdez and colleagues investigate informal self-employment among undocumented Latino day laborers in Central Texas. Previous research suggests that undocumented Latinos constitute an easily exploited, low-wage, low-skilled labor pool in the United States, which results in their overrepresentation in day labor work. This supply-side argument, however, fails to consider the rise in precarious work in the new economy, the criminalization and racialization of day labor work, and the increased diversity of the day labor pool to include “documented” Latino immigrants, U.S.-born Latinos, and even formerly incarcerated White and Black American citizens. They investigate the characteristics of day laborers, their working conditions, and economic outcomes, concluding that day labor is a form of precarious entrepreneurship in the informal economy that is increasingly polarized by race, nativity, and legal status.

Beyond the myriad ways in which structural forces in the economy and society and immigration policy at home and abroad condition self-employment among immigrants in the United States, self-employment is also part and parcel of the neoliberal entrepreneurial dream for citizens of advanced industrial economies. Notably, this notion of self-employment is distinct from that ascribed to immigrant entrepreneurs, in that the former emphasizes the effort of individuals, whereas the latter focuses on the collective. The entrepreneurial ideology associated with “rugged individualists” maintains that through hard work and determination, “self-made men” can embrace their entrepreneurial spirit and achieve economic mobility (Valdez, 2016). In practice, however, the “rags to riches” story is rarely realized. Nevertheless, the strength of the ideology is its function as a rhetorical device that allows for a flexible definition of entrepreneurial success that may or may not include economic considerations. The spiritual marketplace described by Karen Gregory is one such case in point. Gregory examines how Tarot card readers and other esoteric practitioners form a semiformal business network to help foster their self-employment activity in the spiritual and digital marketplace. Although making a living is their primary goal, a discourse of personal growth and transformation allows these

practitioners to equate entrepreneurial success with building an online presence and personal brand. Gregory shows, however, that social inequalities, especially of wealth, prevent some spiritual entrepreneurs from realizing their personal brands or living the “good life.”

Where Gregory’s article highlights the ways in which workers within a very close-knit occupation struggle to manage their social and digital relationships, Cohen’s contribution explores the ways in which occupational variation in self-employment relates to differences in the spatial and temporal organization of work. Cohen posits that gendered differences in self-employment may better be explained by such organizational differences than by differences in how men and women *choose* to do self-employment. Whereas previous studies have seen the spatial and temporal organization of work as a result of self-employment—a sign, for instance, that self-employed workers are exercising freedom—Cohen contends that temporal and spatial “unboundedness” defines the social locations within which self-employment occurs and therefore cannot be thought of as separate from or a by-product but instead should be understood as integral to the reproduction of self-employment.

The struggles of self-employed people for labor representation have frequently been elided, since self-employment does not fit with the standard work arrangements on which much labor and union organizing is premised as archetypal. In their article on organizing among self-employed sex workers in Argentina, Hardy and Cruz ask how can informal self-employed “hard-to-organize” workers generate a collective identity and political subjectivity? By taking on one of the most marginalized occupations, street sex work, they elucidate fundamental practices that can generate shared identities and interests among a group of workers with no existing shared workplace, identity, or collective imaginary. Using concepts of affect, emotion, and intimacy and by focusing on what they term the *intangible* and *ephemeral* in labor organizing, they emphasize the importance of paying attention to the intercorporeal, micro-scale of collective organizing practices. These are, as it becomes clear, of particular importance for groups of workers, such as the self-employed, who have no preexisting sense of shared interests or social location and therefore begin from more complex positions to generate collective standpoints and consciousness.

Conclusion

This special issue starts from the premise that self-employment is both an ideology and practice that encompasses a diversity of experiences at the micro-, meso-, and macro-level. Taken together, the articles in this volume underscore the critical need to unpack self-employment from entrepreneurship, to better understand the function of self-employment in the new economy. Ultimately, the volume introduces new directions in the study of self-employment, an economic activity that remains under-studied and under-specified, especially when compared with its counterpart in the labor market, wage-work. The volume offers new insights and challenges to traditional approaches, especially those that equate self-employment with entrepreneurial dreams, growth, and economic integration. The volume encourages a reconsideration of self-employment that is more nuanced, especially in the context of a changing economy and society.

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