

Dissemination, Dissonances, Depictions.

On the Status of Self-Employed Work in Contemporary Societies

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With the transformation of work and society, self-employed work has left behind its status as marginal work. In contemporary society, it has more or less established itself as normal work and, in the process, has comprehensively reformed itself, so that self-employed work today is characterized by great heterogeneity. This special volume examines the current changes in self-employed work and its status in contemporary society. It brings together contributions that critically examine self-employment both as a form of gainful employment and as a cultural ideal, and that take stock of the status of self-employment.

Whereas self-employment in the postwar years was mostly the preserve of the socially and economically privileged, today it bridges economic sectors and social classes (Bögenhold 2019). With its increasing *dissemination*, new terms and concepts of self-employed work are emerging: from "intrapreneurs", "bogus self-employed", "platform workers", "solo self-employed", "senior entrepreneurs" to "business heirs" - they all have in common that they represent forms of self-employed work, which, however, are rarely considered together. Moreover, the debate on work hybridization shows that the boundaries between dependent and self-employed work are eroding in individual employment trajectories (Bührmann et al. 2018; Murgia et al. 2019).

As self-employed work spreads, its *dissonances* increasingly come to light. Already in the late 1990s, an ambiguous social status was emphasized for self-employed in the cultural and media professions (e.g., Dietrich 1998; Gottschall 1999; Haak/Schmid 2001). Later, the debate about a precarization of self-employed work was continued especially focusing on the rise of solo self-employment in the course of digitalization and tertiarization (Manske 2007; Pongratz/Bührmann 2010). Most recently, the Corona pandemic has shown that the self-employed workers are a vulnerable social group facing specific risks and challenges (Kritikos et al. 2020). It is precisely with those self-employed workers who are affected by precarious conditions or shaken by economic crises that new solidarities emerge (Manske 2023; Stamm et al. 2022; Umney/Kretsos 2015). At the same time, the debate on wealth concentration in Germany highlights that self-employed entrepreneurs and business heirs are prominently represented among the wealthiest (Neckel 2016; Schröder et al. 2020).

Furthermore, *depictions and ideas* of self-employed work are continuously subject to reinterpretation in light of labor market and sociopolitical dynamics. Voß and Pongratz (1998) description of a "worker-entrepreneur" identified a type of depend employees that market their work life self-employed workers. In individualization discourses, self-employed work became the prototype of a flexible and individualized world of employment (Castells 2001), which allows freedom in shaping one's life, but is also associated with new uncertainties (Beck et al. 1996). In the social figure of the "entrepreneurial self" (Bröckling 2007),

the entrepreneurial self-government of the project ego is suggested to be a cultural ideal. The more recent debate about an "entrepreneurship industry" (Brattström 2022) criticizes an increasing commercialization of this ideal in the form of advice literature, consulting services, self-optimization congresses, co-working spaces, etc.

These remarks on the dissemination, dissonances, and depictions of self-employed work make obvious that the phenomenon of self-employed work is firmly anchored in contemporary societies. However, the political, economic, welfare state, cultural or demographic conditions of self-employed work have undergone major changes. To put it bluntly, self-employed work has diffused socially and spread across class, age, gender, sector, etc. boundaries. As a result, self-employed work has changed in such a way that previous assumptions, concepts and empirical approaches cannot adequately grasp this phenomenon neither in its full breadth nor in its significance for contemporary societies. Lacking are contributions that define the continuum of self-employed work and offer a systematic overview, and even more importantly, that offer critical reflections on the dynamics and substantial changes of self-employed work.

The aim of this special volume is to systematically examine the various facets of self-employed work in contemporary societies and to bring together empirical and theoretical analyses that adequately capture self-employed work. The special volume is intended to provide a basic overview of the constitution of self-employed work in theoretical and empirical terms, how this form of work has developed, and which changes it has been subjected to. We invite contributions from a variety of social science disciplines that examine the dissemination, dissonances and depictions of self-employed work. This includes, but is not exhausted by, the following topics:

Dissemination: In order to determine the meaning and changes of self-employed work in contemporary societies, the disseminations and various forms of self-employed work need to be measured. The thematic spectrum ranges from the historical development of self-employed work to recent trends, from sectoral changes to socio-demographic factors, from the embedding of self-employed work in political and economic conditions to its embedding in individual employment histories and life phases. The aim of this study is to encounter the vagueness of previous concepts and terminology with an empirical contouring of contemporary self-employed work.

Dissonance: The dissonances of self-employed work are particularly evident at the levels of the welfare state and wealth distribution. For solo self-employed workers, who are to be regarded as a particularly vulnerable group among the self-employed, new distortions have been described with regard to their integration in social welfare systems and their need to provide for life course risks. Equally important, the important role of self-employed work to excessively accumulate wealth have been identified and need critical reflection. The special volume also takes a look at the representation of interests, since in various sectors interest groups are emerging that go beyond the conventional patterns. There is, however, a lack of comprehensive diagnoses in this respect.

Depictions: Self-employed work is also a cultural model and as such subject to reinterpretation. Therefore, the social discourses and narratives around self-employed work and their changes will be reconstructed. The spectrum includes, for example, the self-employed as (male) craftsmen, the ordinary entrepreneur, the

entrepreneurial self, self-employed work in the activating welfare state, or legitimization narratives of the wealthy.

Contributions can be submitted in German or English. Submission will follow a two-step procedure. Interested authors are asked to submit a one to two page abstract by December 06, 2023 by mail to the editors (ist@mpifg.de; dr.a.manske@gmail.com and katharina.mojescik@uibk.ac.at). All accepted contributors will be invited to a digital conference in February. This will serve as a discussion forum for the authors of the volume to present and further develop their concepts and ideas. Participation in the conference does not imply definitive acceptance of the contribution to the special volume. Complete manuscripts (max. 80,000 characters) must be submitted by May 15, 2024, and will then be reviewed in a double-blind peer-review process. The special volume is scheduled for publication in spring 2025.

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