

Book Review

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The Rise of the European Self-Employed Workforce

*Milan-Udine: Mimesis International, 2018, £19 pbk, (ISBN: 9788869770647), 264 pp.***Reviewed by Martí López-Andreu, University of Leicester, UK**

This book is a crucial contribution to the current debates about the increasing importance of self-employment in European labour markets. Although it is comprised of four separate essays and the manifesto of ACTA, an association of freelance workers, the book nevertheless presents a coherent thesis that is thoroughly and logically developed. The author highlights the centrality of autonomous work and self-employment in the post-Fordist system of production and emphasises its centrality to the changes in flexible production systems. Furthermore, Bologna identifies the need to understand (part) of its growth as a result of the refusal of some workers to participate in the Taylorist discipline of salaried work.

In essay two, the author presents an analysis of the self-employed that defines its core characteristics in opposition to salaried work. Firstly, the author highlights the higher relevance of relational and communication work for self-employed workers in contrast to (the ideal-type of) salaried workers. On the other hand, Bologna successfully emphasises the different perceptions of space and time among the two types of workers. Secondly, he identifies the domestication of the workplace, understood as the fusion between work and household and the increasing role of the family in work-related activities, as a primary characteristic of the self-employed. The author also emphasises the autonomy in the organisation of time as a key difference between the self-employed and salaried workers. The book then moves on to explore different characteristics that help to define the self-employed (including the form of remuneration, professional identity, the resources needed to enter and to stay in the market, among others) to emphasise the increasing insecurity of the self-employed. The concept of ‘existential risk’ (pp. 119–120) is used to identify the effect of individualisation and decollectivisation that the self-employment status implies. Crucially, this risk is identified in three dimensions: in guaranteeing workers’ subsistence, in ensuring the reproduction of the workforce (as they do not have access to many employment and social benefits) and in the preservation of constant capital (technology and tools). It is in this discussion that the social and academic relevance of the book is fully revealed. The book centres the debate on the ‘social question’ of the self-employed, specifically thinking

through how to develop securities to face the above-mentioned existential risks, and engages with potential ways in which the self-employed can be socially recognised and their existential risks protected. In this context, Bologna's contribution engages with the discussion developed by Robert Castel (2003) in his analysis of the 'social question' posed by dependent workers in the 19th and 20th centuries that crystallised the status of the salaried employee and its different rights and protections. In a nutshell, Bologna poses the crucial question of how society (including employers and the State) should recognise and protect the existential risk of the self-employed.

In this context, in essays one and three, the book engages with potential collective strategies and outlines the possibilities for the development of a status for independent workers. The analysis of the self-employed as a social group with specific interests based on the work of German social scientists before the Second World War helps the author to identify them as a social group characterised by specific economic and prestige features. On the other hand, while the aftermath of the Second World War and the Fordist period led to the decrease of self-employment, Bologna identifies a 'new' generation of self-employed based in an analysis of Germany and Italy. These so-called 'new' self-employed showed different characteristics than the 'classic' self-employed mentioned above, and revealed the rejection of the factory and Taylorist discipline and the engagement in alternative and cooperative projects. At this point, the author tends to overemphasise the voluntariness and freedom of self-employment in opposition to salaried work. Furthermore, although false or bogus self-employment is briefly mentioned at the end of the book, the main thesis would have benefited from a clearer distinction between genuine and false self-employment (actual independent work or bogus self-employment). This would have been especially relevant in the context of business restructuring and the increasing use of contract workers, reinforced by the development of platform-based work and the gig economy.

In spite of these potential omissions, the book makes a crucial contribution to the current debate about the growth of self-employed workers. Firstly, by offering an analysis of self-employed and independent workers as a social group affected by specific existential risks related to their dependence on the market and the State. The book's second contribution is to the understanding of the growth of self-employment as a complex phenomenon resulting from business restructuring and the search for independent and autonomous work. It is therefore crucial reading for researchers interested in self-employment and self-employed workers.

Reference

Castel R (2003) *From Manual Workers to Wage Laborers: Transformation of the Social Question*. London and New York: Routledge.