

**Neither Precarious Nor Entrepreneur:
The Subjective Experience of Hybrid Self-employed Workers**

Published in the journal:

Economic and Industrial Democracy, doi: 10.1177/0143831X19873966.

*Annalisa Murgia*¹

Department of Social and Political Sciences,

University of Milan, Italy

Orcid.org/0000-0002-9740-4532

Valeria Pulignano

Center for Sociological Research (CESO)

KU Leuven, Belgium

Orcid.org/0000-0002-6466-491X

Abstract

This article focuses on the ‘hybridity’ of solo self-employment by shedding light on the lived experiences and meanings of the subjects within their institutional and socio-economic contexts. It offers an original perspective to the study of the hybridisation of work by linking between subjective and objective conditions underpinning solo self-employed workers. We found that solo-self employed workers exercise agency over their working lives when facing high levels of insecurity, and that their contextualised experiences are related to the dominant narratives about

¹ Reference author: annalisa.murgia@unimi.it.

self-employment. At the same time, however, we also point out that solo self-employed are engaged in (re)-constructing their alternative and dissonant narratives as well.

Introduction

Self-employment has received increasing interest by scholarly and policy work due to growing transformations in the nature of work following changes in labor markets and welfare as well as technological and organisational changes. When discussing the emergence of these new forms of work, already at the end of the 90's researches have begun to refer to the 'grey' or 'hybrid' areas between traditional classifications of employment and self-employment (Dupuy and Larré, 1998; Supiot, 1999). This distinction reflects the decline of career patterns where workers traditionally spend their whole careers in one organisation working with a stable, socially protected, dependent and full-time job. Within contemporary labor markets, combining elements of salaried employment and self-employment is becoming more 'typical' or less 'untypical' (Bureau and Dieuaide, 2018; Conen and Schippers, 2019).

Although policy and scholarly attention has been devoted to examining the social effects of evolving patterns of work – such as maintaining the relevance of social security in the face of this evolution – more empirical research is needed to explore the subjective experience of 'hybrid self-employed workers', and especially those without employees (or solo self-employed). Solo self-employment has progressively become a sort of 'boundary' object of study, which has been investigated in academic fields such as employment relations, entrepreneurship and cultural studies. Beyond these different approaches, a distinction is usually made between self-employment out of necessity and out of opportunity, focusing attention on different conditions: imposed false self-employment (Bögenhold and Staber, 1991; Buschhoff and Schmidt, 2009); the increase of precariousness in self-employment, including

among workers who enjoy working as freelancers (Conen and Schippers, 2019; Gill, 2002; Hesmondhalgh and Baker, 2010); and the growth and survival of nano/micro businesses and start-ups (Leighton, 2015; Thurik et al., 2008). In this contribution, we want to highlight how these conditions may overlap and how they can be differently experienced by ‘hybrid self-employed workers’.

By hybridisation of work, we mean the blurring boundaries – both at the structural and at the cultural level – of working experiences that were earlier typical either of self-employment or of salaried employment. Therefore, focusing on the hybridity of solo self-employment means “acknowledging the growing porosity of the boundaries of the employment relationship, which prevents us from being satisfied by any binary categorisation between employment and self-employment or subordination and autonomy” (Azaïs, 2019: 223). On the one side, holding multiple jobs – as self-employed, employee or in the informal economy – becomes more and more common as well as the intertwinement between work and private times and spaces. On the other side, the hybridisation of work is challenging the hegemonic narratives and the cultural repertoires about employment and self-employment and questioning the prevalence of the wage-earning model. Following this perspective, we aim to analyse the dynamic connections between subjects and social structure, in order to understand: (i) how solo self-employed workers are affected by institutions and by the economic conditions that characterise the context in which they live; (ii) how their lived experiences are perceived and the meaning that is attributed to them by the interviewed subjects; (iii) how their experiences are related to the dominant narratives about self-employment, in order to understand whether – within an emerging category of workers – alternative and dissonant narratives are constructed.

Consequently, this article is an attempt to understand the implications of social institutions and structural conditions on self-employed workers, and their subjective experiences and meaning-making. In particular, by leveraging recent debates that encourage

further exploration of how self-employed workers make sense of their work (Osnowitz and Henson, 2016; Vallas and Christin, 2017), we focus on the ‘hybrid solo self-employed workers’ by exploring the ways they exercise agency over their working lives when facing an increased level of insecurity, within the scope of a qualitative study with fifty highly educated solo self-employed workers in urban areas in Northern Italy.

The article is structured as follows. Firstly, we discuss the transformations of self-employment and the construction of new workers’ subjectivities. Secondly, after introducing the case study context and methods, we present the empirical section that illustrates how the research participants experience, in practice, a self-employed contract, how they cope or negotiate with the connected risks, the meaning attributed to their experience, and the narratives they construct about their actual working conditions. Finally, we discuss our findings and conclude.

Emerging Changes and Challenges in Self-employment

Ongoing debate on changes in the standard employment relationship – traditionally embodied in a (male) employee with a dependent, open-ended and full-time contract, and who enjoys the full protection of labor law and the welfare system – has been widely developed in the light of the apparent increased use of non-standard forms of employment. Non-standard employment does not refer to a homogeneous category, but includes various work arrangements such as part-time, fixed-term, temporary agency, casual, on-call, zero-hours and solo self-employment (Adams and Deakin, 2014; Kalleberg, 2009; Vosko, 2010). Scholarly work has measured the extent to which these work arrangements impact on the stability of employment and the availability of social protections (D’Amours and Legault, 2013; Hipp et al., 2015). However, not all non-standard work arrangements are necessarily precarious, while workers on standard

employment contracts may also suffer from insecurity. Therefore, considering the standard employment relationship as a proxy to determine the degree of insecurity someone experiences may be limiting (Lewchuk, 2017; Pulignano and Doerflinger, 2013).

Nevertheless, non-standard working arrangements have increased nationwide in most countries, although at different degrees, representing a growing proportion of total employment (Kalleberg and Vallas, 2017; Stone, 2013). Among non-standard arrangements, in 2015 self-employed workers represented 10.1% of the labor force in the United States (Hipple and Hammond, 2016) and 14.9% in Europe (Eurofound, 2017), a proportion which has slightly decreased over the past two decades. However, a more accurate analysis of trends of self-employment shows how its composition has changed, with a strong decrease in the agricultural sector and a significant increase in services and industries (Hipple and Hammond, 2016; Schippers, 2019). Moreover, country (and regional) specific dynamics need to be considered when analysing self-employment. For example, in the US in 2015, in some states it was more common, such as in Montana (16.1%) and California (11.7%), while in others it was less present, going below 10% (7.2% in Delaware and 7.5% in Alabama, for example) (Hipple and Hammond, 2016). Also in Europe, in the same year some countries had self-employment rates below 10% (8% in Denmark and 9% in Estonia and Luxembourg) and some countries had quite high rates, like Greece (31%) and Italy (23%) (Eurofound, 2017) – the latter is at the core of this article.

Also self-employed workers, then, do not compose a homogeneous category, but are more and more diversified both in terms of their opportunities and risks, and of the employment sectors and professional fields in which they work (Conen et al., 2016; Jansen, 2016). In this frame, the ‘solo self-employed’ comprise an even more heterogeneous category of labour force participants, with different educational levels and careers developed both in high and low skilled jobs (D’Amours and Legault, 2013; van Stel et al., 2014).

Solo self-employed workers are in a situation which differs from that of a traditionally conceived dependent worker because of the lack of an authority employment relationship. However, it is often hard to apply this standard distinction in practice, given the presence of self-employed workers with characteristics of dependent employees (work for one client; no authority to hire staff and/or to make strategic decisions about how to run their business) (Eurofund, 2013; Williams and Horodnic, 2018). Moreover, employers increasingly hire solo self-employed workers to evade employment protections, reduce labor costs and avoid paying unemployment benefits and social security (Kalleberg, 2000; Romàn et al., 2011). This means that they often replace dependent employees with workers who are legally self-employed, but in fact wholly dependent on the company ('bogus' or 'false' self-employment). Therefore, it is clear that the emergence of solo self-employment mirrors a puzzle of labour market patterns and subjective perceptions in which the sharp dichotomy between wage- or labour-dependent work, on the one side, and autonomous and self-employed activities, on the other, is muddled. This occurs either because hybrid forms of combinations arise, where people have more than one job at a time, or along the biographical axis of individual careers, so that we observe patterns of multiplicity and parallelisms. Due to these circumstances, the simple black and white dichotomy of being dependent or self-employed seems to have become a pattern which loses practical relevance in many cases, because people are not either/or but both. This poses the question of investigating how self-employment is socially constructed, considering both macro and micro levels of analysis. In this article, we highlight the importance of developing a sociological analysis on the individual experiences and narratives of solo self-employed workers as a way to add knowledge to the analysis of the blurring boundaries between employment and self-employment, and to the analysis of the legal, educational, and policy institutions that can support individual careers.

Existing studies in the sociology of work have drawn attention to organisationally rooted structures and processes that impinge upon the inequalities that workers experience on the job (Kalleberg and Berg, 1987). Institutional and macroeconomic conditions that contribute to shaping work structures and the processes through which labour market dualisation and inequality manifest have also been widely examined (Pulignano et al., 2017). Along these lines, processes of deregulation, and more specifically flexibilisation, are deemed to be transforming traditional work arrangements (Kalleberg, 2009; Muffels, 2008; Prosser, 2016). At the same time, other promising research avenues have been opened up by scholars who champion the importance of refining theoretical tools able to understand the meanings that self-employed workers give to their positions in the labour market, and the strategies they use to navigate between autonomy and constraint, and between identification in their work and insecurity (Barley and Kunda, 2004; Osnowitz, 2010; Vallas and Christin, 2017).

In this article, we acknowledge how the working conditions of solo self-employed workers are shaped by structural factors, such as social protection, income and undeclared work or bogus self-employment. On the other hand, we do also investigate an aspect not sufficiently analysed in the current debate, namely how, in the ‘new spirit of capitalism’ (Boltanski and Chiapello, 1999), individuals exercise their agency and manage their skills and networks to create spaces for freedom and autonomy, and to open a repertoire of strategies and meanings able to support the career they aspire to pursue. Inspired by Beck’s pioneering work (1992, 2000), we explore the ambivalences and tensions lived by solo self-employed workers. From this perspective, adding the subjective perspective of the workers to the structural and institutional accounts of change is essential to understand how hybrid self-employed careers emerge as the result of workers’ experiences and emerging narratives of the ongoing transformations in the labor market.

Freely Insecure: Emerging Subjectivities in Solo Self-employment

The previously described configuration of the hybrid forms of self-employment does not simply promote the blurring of boundaries between self-employment and dependent employment. Rather, it is itself the manifestation of a deep cultural change that is affecting both employment forms and the ways in which workers interpret their experiences and shape their subjectivity.

In the last few years, several scholars have emphasized the significance of focusing on both structural and cultural forces to analyse how work and employment are historically situated, how they are changing, and the direction that they are taking (Hatton, 2011; Ho, 2009; Lane, 2011; Sharone, 2014; Vallas and Prener, 2012).

The signs of an important cultural change are traceable in a series of trends that are at the basis of the process of ‘reflexive modernization’ (Beck et al., 1994), which progressively erodes both collective and individual certainties. Firstly, family relationships have been ‘de-traditionalized’, leaving space for individuals to take their own decisions (Gherardi and Murgia, 2013). Secondly, due to more frequent geographical moves and that workers move swiftly from project to project and from employer to employer, the sense of community has decreased, as has the sense of belonging to a local as well as to a professional community (Sennett, 1998; Tempest and Starkey, 2004). Thirdly, investment in education and work and occupation, based on calculative regulation, became a priority in individual’s decisions, and this is not limited to the educational and professional spheres, as the agency of individuals – increasingly framed in terms of the enterprising of life – follows the same logics in different realms of social life, such as family and community (Kallinikos, 2003).

These trends are expressions of the phenomenon known as ‘individualization’ (Beck, 1992), which emphasizes the fact that individuals have been freed from their traditional roles

by convergent social transformations, but they are also required to individually construct their own 'do-it-yourself biographies' (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 1996) and to harmonize them with those of others. Therefore, the individualization process is characterized not only as a project for emancipation, but also in terms of the characteristics required of people, and whose satisfaction is their direct responsibility. This ambivalence is particularly evident in the case of highly educated self-employed workers, who experience the dilemma expressed in the 'paradox of individualization' (Honneth, 2004): while on one hand, the flexibilization of work content and form has enabled greater personalization and enrichment of work, on the other hand, it has also produced the phenomenon of work intensification, which often invades the private and social spheres of individuals, multiplying the risks of breakdown and marginalization (Armano and Murgia, 2017). In addition, nowadays the process of individualization takes place in a context characterised by a more intense competition and harder completion for jobs, due to both globalisation and the introduction of new technology through performance and rating-systems.

In our contribution, we discuss how solo self-employed workers manage and interpret their different working experiences when they are exposed to irregular income, low social protection and, at times, poor quality working conditions. With this aim, we explore the tension between structure and agency (Hyman and Gumbrell-McCormick, 2017; Vallas and Christin, 2017) by conceptualising self-employment as socially constructed, and individuals as "simultaneously both subjects and objects of their societies" (Collinson, 2003: 542). This means, on the one side, to acknowledge how individual experiences are affected both by ongoing economic and institutional transformations (Kalleberg, 2009, 2012) and by the wider cultural changes that have transformed workers' orientations toward themselves and their employment relationships (Smith, 2010; Vallas and Prener, 2012) while legitimatising the aforementioned institutional transformations (Pulignano, 2018). On the other side, however,

this approach mainly aims to foster a renewed interest in the role of human agency and subjectivity, conceptualised as a situation of ‘socially constructed autonomy’ (Beck et al., 2003), where the subjects are embedded in contexts that shapes their subjectivity, being at the same time able to exercise their own agency.

In the academic debate focused on creative and highly skilled freelancers and self-employed workers, a key role has been played by studies that highlight the significance of autonomy and freedom (Bologna, 2018; Fraser and Gold, 2001; Hesmondhalgh and Baker, 2010). According to these studies, such workers are passionately attached to their jobs (Armano and Murgia, 2013; Umney and Kretsos, 2015) and the main target of the ‘enterprise discourse’ (du Gay, 1996) which, by promoting a management ideology (Chiapello and Fairclough, 2002; Lane, 2011), idealizes flexible employment and becomes part of workers’ identities.

However, individuals are not just passive recipients of subjugating discourses, as they can also deploy their (discursive) agency (Butler, 1997). Several authors, in fact, describe this group of workers as also potentially able to mobilise and generate new forms of resistance. For example, to underline their ambivalent position, Mason (2013) discusses the crucial role that the generation of ‘graduates with no future’ is playing in current social movements. In a similar way, Standing (2011) represents these workers as one of the components of the ‘precariat’ – they are highly educated and grew up with the promise of a successful career, but they have come to face different forms of insecurity – but possibly able to get organised and create an alternative collective experience, especially because they tend to reject both the dominant ideologies of productivity and neo-liberalism.

Focusing on the agency of this emerging groups of self-employed workers does not mean to consider them as free from constraints of context. Much scholarly debate has already questioned the celebrative emphasis placed on the formation of a new ‘creative class’ (Florida, 2002) or a ‘free agent nation’ (Pink, 2011), supposedly composed of people able to decide their

own terms of work, who are mobile, enthusiastic, with solid professional networks and, because of their talent, able to simultaneously deal with multiple projects and multiple clients. Several studies, in fact, have pointed out how, besides flexible ‘portfolio’ careers, there is a significant exploitative dimension for this group of workers, who are subject to ‘constrained choices’ (Gill, 2002; Smeaton, 2003) and considered as a component of precarious forms of employment (Buschoff and Schmidt, 2009; Vosko et al., 2003).

The challenge is then to understand the complexity and the multi-dimensionality of solo self-employment – its becoming ‘hybrid’ – and to move forward from the ‘push-pull debate’, which polarizes workers between subjects pulled into self-employment because of their desire for independence and autonomy, or pushed into such work for economic necessity, like the lack of other job opportunities. In fact, many combinations of push and pull factors may represent reasons for becoming self-employed (Hughes, 2003), which cannot be appreciated by dichotomising the desires for freedom and security. In the US context, Pugh (2015) describes the different ways in which individuals adapt to the ‘insecurity culture’, “a culture of personal responsibility and risk, linked to the spread of precariousness at work, the neoliberal receding of the state, and the dominance of the market” (Pugh, 2015: 4). Lane’s (2011) study reached similar conclusions, discussing how workers have embraced a ‘career management’ ideology, in which they engage in several forms of unpaid labour, with the aim to constantly update their skills, and are the only ones responsible for their own careers.

In this study, conducted in a southern European context, we explore the consequences of structural conditions on highly educated solo self-employed workers, the agency that they exercise in actively choosing to follow a career about which they are passionate, and their ability to construct alternative narratives to represent their professional condition. By challenging current conventional approaches that reduce self-employment to an employment contract or a legal status, we interrogate the subjective experience and meaning-making of the

hybrid self-employed workers we interviewed and illustrate that the boundaries between different self-employed positions are blurred not just because individuals move back and forth and have multiple (dependent, independent and informal) jobs at the same time, and with significant different job quality, but also because they have mixed identities that are shaped by different ideological forces.

Case Study Context and Methods

Self-employment is radically changing at a global level. Within Europe, different countries show very different trends, with strong decreases and increases at the same time. In this scenario, Italy represents a particularly interesting case.

Firstly, while it is undeniable that Italy is one of the countries where self-employment is more common in Europe (representing 23% of the working population against an EU average of 14%), its evolution and composition needs a more fine-grained analysis (Eurofound, 2017). At the national level, in fact, self-employment has actually decreased in the last ten years. However, this figure concerned mainly people without degrees (-18.0%), while self-employed graduates increased by 21.6%. In 2016 the rate of graduates who were self-employed workers without employees was 35.6% (and it has increased by 6.6% over the last ten years) (Eurostat, 2017). This trend confirms the results of previous studies, which showed that in Italy solo self-employed workers, including ‘dependent self-employed workers’, are mainly highly educated professionals, although they often do not have a high specialization in the job (Borghi and Murgia, 2019; Muehlberger and Pasqua, 2009; Ranci, 2012).

Secondly, Italy is one of the countries where self-employment is more common, and it is also one of the few cases in Europe where a hybrid legal status between self-employment and dependent employment has been created. Indeed, in the mid-1990s, a special fund of the

national institute for social security – named *gestione separata* – was created for project workers on continuous collaboration contracts and professionals in sectors not covered by independent funds (Muehlberger and Bertolini, 2008; Reyneri, 1998). These employment contracts (as well as the traditional independent professions) have been reformed several times through the years, until the last long-awaited reform, the “Jobs Act of Self-employment” (Act 81/2017). This reform addressed some crucial aspects connected to self-employed social protection, but it was not able to provide a systematic legal framework for self-employment regulation, keeping relevant distinctions between traditional independent professionals and non-regulated forms of self-employment (Perulli, 2017).

The research was conducted in Northern regions, also taking into consideration that the major cities in the North of Italy continue to be particularly attractive for highly educated young people (Miur, 2017). More specifically, the research was conducted in the main urban centers of the regions with the highest percentage of graduates aged 20-34, namely Trentino, Emilia Romagna and Lombardy (Istat, 2016). The study draws on 51 interviews collected between 2011 and 2015 with highly educated male and female self-employed workers in non-regulated professional occupations. We sampled only solo self-employed workers – i.e. self-employed workers without employees – but this does not mean that all participants were working exclusively as self-employed. Most of the participants had a multiple employment status, being at the same time engaged in salaried work or in the informal economy. We did not include in the sample traditional independent professionals, like accountants, lawyers or doctors, because they have specific regulations, and because we were interested in understanding emerging self-employment professions. The interviewees had all completed a Master’s degree and were living in urban areas in Northern Italy (see Annex 1). Interviewing people with these characteristics revealed particularly relevant since they reflect the part of Italian self-employment that is growing constantly and more rapidly. The last criterion we considered for sample selection was

work seniority. Since we were interested in understanding self-employed workers' careers, interviewing people with at least five years' work experience as self-employed after having obtained their degree provided a good basis to study their experiences in the labor market over a significant period.

In terms of sampling frame, having excluded traditional independent professionals, we could not rely on the existence of a register and on the involvement of professional associations or umbrella organisations. Because of the difficulty in accessing non-regulated solo self-employed workers, interviewees were contacted through chain referral sampling. We began with personal contacts in the three selected regions, where the first author developed several collaborations along the years, and messages posted online through social media. In all three contexts, we then asked the first research participants for referrals, taking into consideration the inclusion criteria for the sample – solo self-employed workers, with a master's degree either in SSH (Social Sciences and Humanities) or in STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics) disciplines, and with at least five years' work experience. This resulted in a group of interviewees aged between 28 and 39 years. At the time of interview, participants were all self-employed without employees in the following sectors: training and teaching (5), IT (5), translations (4), copywriting/editing (4), local policy (4), research (3), archaeology (3), media (4), cultural events (3), administration (3), journalism (3), finance and insurance sectors (2), project management (2), museums (2), labs (2), and the green economy (2). The participants' names have been pseudonymised and replaced with a fictitious name because of ethical issues.

The interviews were conducted in Italian. They lasted between 1-2.5 hours and were audio recorded. The first set of questions addressed career trajectories and strategies enacted to handle income and job instability. The second set of questions were related to interviewees' current working situations and the everyday lives, with a particular focus on their work orientations, preferences, and lived experiences. The texts were then transcribed and coded

using the software Atlas.ti. The interview quotations to be included in this publication have been translated into English by the author who conducted the interviews, in order to maintain as much as possible the adherence to the meaning attributed by the interviewed subjects. To deploy data analysis, we followed an inductive research process based on a progressive scale of abstraction through the stages of open, focused, axial and theoretical coding (Charmaz, 2006). In the first stage we named the phenomena described by the interviewees. In a second stage, by comparing how similar concepts were used in different interviews, we grouped them under more abstract categories – such as lack of social protection, relatively low income or multiple jobs – in order to define their characteristics and the interviewees' positions along a continuum. Through axial coding, we focused on the connections and interactions between categories. Finally, we selected the ones which played a key role and interpreted our findings in light of the bodies of literature that oriented our research.

Findings

Experiencing the Poor Quality of Self-Employment

Among the interviewed solo self-employed workers, the heterogeneity of the specific situations was very high, ranging from independent professionals to bogus self-employed workers. Some respondents had good working conditions and high levels of autonomy, while others worked in a subordinate way, without the possibility of negotiating times and working spaces. However, their work situations cannot be classified into different and polarized groups, because almost all interviewees – although to different extents – had experienced both of these work conditions. Elisa (31, Masters in Computer Science), for example, adds to the ranks of both 'false' and 'genuine' self-employment:

I have been self-employed in a company that wanted me there, planted in the office, from 9 to 6. But I've also been the website manager of some other companies where I was allowed to work where I wanted [...] The real issue is that being self-employed, no matter what your working conditions are, you have no right to anything, from sickness to maternity leave, not to mention holidays or unemployment benefit.

Despite the differences in terms of professional sector, family background, and level of identification and autonomy in their job, research participants overwhelmingly mentioned as a main issue the consequences that being self-employed has for their personal lives. In particular, a lack of rights was present in all interviewees' stories, and health and family-related decisions were perceived as common concerns, described as relevant difficulties that a self-employed worker has to deal with. In particular, having children was presented as a desirable life goal that one is not even allowed to think about. Although expressed with different intensity in comparison to women, men also expressed regret, and sometimes anger, for having had to renounce becoming a parent, as shown by Roberto (30), who works as chemist in a lab:

A municipal kindergarten costs around €450 a month, the private one costs double, and my parents live in the South of Italy. I work full time and I usually earn around €800 per month, and my partner is even more precarious than me. Do you want to have a baby? Go for it...

Among the research participants, Roberto is part of a group of people who moved from Southern to Northern Italy to attend university and then decided to settle down in the city where they studied. Their experiences are less smooth, especially because of their family distance and

the difficulty of building a network in a context where they have few acquaintances. The main difficulties in developing a family project are represented by the uneven costs of childcare provision, especially in the range 0-3 years, and by the indefinite and unforeseeable working times, which are incompatible with any care activities. Many interviewees, in fact, complain not only that working and living times become more and more indistinguishable, as we will see in the next section, but also that they are not able to plan their work as they would like to.

The possibility of an illness is one of the interviewees' other most cited fears. Again, in this case we heard voices in unison – all research participants perceived illness as being out of their control, for various reasons. In some cases, what worried them was the fact of having to deal with an illness without any economic support; in others, the most frightening aspect was the fear of losing their job and their professional network. Valentina (31, teacher of Spanish) experiences both positions. Even a single week of absence can have a strong impact on a self-employed worker, especially if they receive a low income:

As a self-employed worker, I have to hope not to get sick, not just because nobody wants to be sick, but because for me a month with a week of stupid flu is a month in which I gain much less. You don't think "I want to feel better, now I recover, I rest...", you think "Damn it, how do I get to the end of the month?" And then if you don't work for more than a few weeks, you never know if in the meantime they have replaced you!

One might well argue that these are not new aspects of self-employment. The ability to handle the risk individually is indeed one of its main features. But what seems to have changed, in the experience of the research participants, is mainly the quality of self-employment and the level of income. Luca (37, journalist) had the highest income level among the interviewees. He

had been a journalist for eight years and has collaborated with big magazines nationwide. However, he complains about not earning enough to compensate for his exposure to risk:

[*Name of a magazine*] gives me about €900 per month, then I also have another collaboration, which gives me €1,200 every two months, and some pieces for another newspaper. So, it's okay, I feel very lucky compared to my colleagues, and I feel better than when I was an employee. But if I compare myself to my parents... they were REAL self-employed, not little freelancers, as I am... There is no longer a balance between income and uncertainty. If you earn €4,000 per month, which means almost €10,000 as household income, who cares about uncertainty!

Luca would like to individually face the uncertainty, and during the interview repeatedly highlighted his desire to build a career as an independent professional, underlining the emancipatory dimension of self-employment. He stressed several times the fact that after he graduated he worked as an employee for a magazine (with a fixed-term contract), but without fully enjoying his work, because of the centralized authority and the lack of autonomy. In fact, he considers the risk to be part of a self-employed career, and the only difficulty he mentions is his low earning, which does not allow him to cope with uncertainty. This is the reason why he defines himself as a *little freelancer*, to mark a difference between the *real self-employed* who, like his parents, were able to bear the economic risk related to their own business.

Despite the perceived insecurity, during his interview, Luca did not just idealize self-employment, especially in comparison to standard employment relations. He also called himself *lucky* several times, a recurring expression in the narratives of many interviewees. In Luca's case, *luck* means, firstly, to have a decent income and, secondly, to enjoy his work. However, for most of the interviewees, 'feeling lucky' is not necessarily linked to their income

level. Marco (32, copywriter), for instance, earned less than €1,000 per month, but he described his experience as meaningful and characterised by personal fulfilment:

One way or another at 30 years old you must be able to support yourself, and you need at least €1,000 per month... I am about €950 per month, depending on the collaborations I have... But consider that my rent is €350, plus all other expenses... Then I realize I'm lucky, there are those who are ten times worse, at least I do the job that I love!

Marco embodies the experience of most of the highly educated self-employed workers we interviewed, who were over thirty and received an income slightly higher than €1,000 per month. However, among participants a relatively low income tended not to be perceived in terms of failure or inability to manage their own business, because there was widespread awareness of low earnings and of the erosion of the quality of self-employment.

In this section, we have mainly described the work situations of the interviewed solo self-employed workers, and then illustrated their subjective perceptions in relation to their socio-economic features. In the next sections, we will return to the subject of how passion for work is relevant to the interviewees, and how their subjectivity is shaped.

In Search of Passion and Autonomy

The research participants' narratives were fairly homogeneous regarding the lack of adequate social protection to build a future life project. Parenthood and sickness were perceived as the most problematic aspects, which are concerns shared by other categories of non-standard workers. A specific concern of our participants was instead the low earnings, especially in comparison to the previous generation of self-employed. However, in their accounts, their level

of income did not seem to affect their involvement and identification with their work. Across sectors and levels of income, passion and autonomy were, in fact, the main narratives constructed by the interviewees to describe how they had become self-employed workers. There were rarely economic reasons. Silvia (33, educator), though complaining about the overly frantic rhythms of her work, explicitly defined her job as a *job-passion*:

I've always considered my job as a priority... because I enjoy it, I like it, it satisfies me, I'm autonomous and this makes me feel more dynamic... it's a job-passion. Then it's also true that I do not know how long I can bear these rhythms...

Giovanni (30, IT sector) also provides a vivid example of the significance of autonomy and passion shared by the highly educated workers interviewed:

I am happy with my job, also because I'm actually very autonomous. It's exciting, my colleagues like me, we're also thinking about creating something on our own in the future.

The representation of their work as a source of pleasure and a meaningful activity, with lots of satisfaction, was common among most interviewees, who carried out professions relatively consistent with their university studies or that in any case met their aspirations, though in some cases only partially or with very low incomes. 'Absorbing', 'important', and 'meaningful' were recurring terms, intertwined with expressions such as 'dynamism', 'autonomy', 'freedom', and 'independence', understood to be not so much about being self-employed, but as freedom in managing their own time.

The passion-autonomy bond also has relevant implications in terms of the blurred lines between work, leisure and private lives, which are typical of self-employment. The following quotes are from two interviewees with very different profiles. The first comes from Viola (35, translator), who works with both publishers and film distribution companies. The second comes from Alessio (31, IT sector), who works in a start-up and deals with technological innovation:

My hobbies and my interests are linked to the cinema, so at the end the audiovisual translation or the translation of a text... they are all passions... free time is more or less interconnected, I don't think so much in terms of division between work and free time.

It's very difficult to separate what I do for my job from what I do out of passion... I know that this affects my life very much and that actually my spaces outside my job are quite limited, but at the moment I don't mind, I like staying in this environment.

Work and personal interests are so intertwined in the experiences of Viola and Alessio, as well as those of many participants, that they become indistinguishable. This happens both because work can coincide with hobbies, and because participation in extra-work events is often one of the main ways of creating and maintaining professional networks.

Despite low incomes and the absence of social protection, the highly qualified workers interviewed enacted various strategies to keep their passions alive and to continue their careers being self-employed. Some of them, even in periods when they had no ongoing projects, kept collaborations for free or found informal ways of *staying in the environment*. These strategies were economically viable for the interviewees because – to supplement the income generated by the work in which they identify themselves – most of them worked at the same time on other projects, for which they were often overqualified. This means that not only do they experience

both ‘false’ and ‘genuine’ self-employment in the course of their career, but they experience it simultaneously. Miriam (29, urban security expert), for example, had long been involved in projects funded by the municipality or other government agencies, and had a second (part-time) job, which left her plenty of time for what she considers her main job (despite not being her main source of income):

I work in a nursery school as a stop-gap, which gave me the opportunity to continue with my real job. It leaves a lot of free time because I only teach in the morning, so I can keep my job with the criminology center in [*a city in Northern Italy*] and I can carry on the two things at the same time.

Holding a second job, for 18-24 hours a week (as self-employed, but also as an employee), is one of the ways to support a self-employed career in a context consistent with qualifications and future aspirations. Private schools, from kindergarten to secondary school, seem to be one of the main sectors where self-employed workers are able to find a second job. This phenomenon is highly gendered in terms of workers’ distribution: while we find almost only women in kindergartens, the presence of men increases in the secondary schools.

Another strategy adopted by research participants concerns the ability to value non-professional skills, such as skills in sport or in playing a musical instrument. Sabrina (33, educator) had been playing piano since she was a little girl and some years ago started teaching it in a school of music to support her career as self-employed:

As a freelancer educator, I get €11 gross per hour, I inevitably have to do something else, but I like my job, I don’t want to leave it... and since I play the piano, I’ve been teaching

in a music school all these years... without any employment contract. I take €12 per hour, cash. In this way... okay... let's say that more or less I get a monthly salary.

Piano, tennis or football lessons are all activities that allow a person to cope with low earnings and income discontinuity. In such cases, self-employment blends with activities carried out in the informal economy, which can be managed very flexibly in order to maintain one's own autonomy and fulfil the commitments taken with the various clients or projects in progress.

Our interviews show how self-employed careers become hybrid in multiple ways. Firstly, there are cases in which workers are formally self-employed, but involved in a *de facto* dependent employment relationship. Secondly, self-employment becomes hybrid in its intertwining with other work side-activities (self-employed, dependent or rooted in the informal economy), which are not related to the job in which the interviewees identify themselves, but that in some way support them. Thirdly, to make hybrid the careers of the highly educated self-employed workers interviewed is the mingling of leisure and professional activities, and of times of work and private lives. These conditions, however, even when imposed by the client, are not passively suffered by the interviewees, who describe autonomy and their ability to express their interests and competencies as their main goals in building their professional careers.

The Lack of a Collective Narrative

In analysing how the research participants experience being self-employed in practice, we have explored both the ways in which they use their agency to manage their careers and how their subjectivity is shaped. Among the highly skilled workers interviewed, some expressed the

desire to be hired as an employee. However, these were only a few cases, and almost always motivated not so much by the attraction of job stability and more regular rhythms, but rather by the rights associated with a standard employment relationship. The quote from Valentina (31, teacher of Spanish) expresses this position clearly:

I have to tell you that I don't want to have a permanent job, but at the same time it's a problem not to have a contract as employee. I don't like the idea, I don't have the mentality of a permanent job, but I simply want to have the possibility to have more rights, and a minimum of bargaining power...

Most research participants claimed that they did not want a standard employment relationship, but at the same time emphasized the critical issues of working as self-employed. While describing their working conditions, the interviewees frequently used metaphors to express the individualization of their work experience. In their narratives, despite promising more creativity and choice, self-employed activities also represented tangible dilemmas. They are experienced, in fact, not just a project for emancipation, but also a risk of breakdown and marginalization that has to be faced individually. To illustrate this condition, Anna (30, museum worker) described herself as a 'tiny fish in the ocean', exposed to a 'constant precariousness'. However, the perception of atomization did not prevent her from thinking of possible collective solutions. During the interview, in fact, she pointed to a photograph of a submarine hanging on the wall of her kitchen, and argued that perhaps it was possible to face insecurity collectively by 'finding your own school of fish':

If this constant precariousness was mitigated by the fact that you earned more... then it would be reasonable, wouldn't it? You pay me three times more, so if I have to go to the

dentist or I get a flu, I don't need to be desperate. But if you are a tiny fish in the ocean, then you live in constant terror. Perhaps the solution is finding your own school of fish...

The need to avoid individualization and the lack of collective experience was present in many interviews. Research participants tended to feel alone in dealing with uncertainty and structural inequalities, mainly because they rarely experienced work-related solidarity. Cristina (36, trainer), with a background in education, mentioned Bauman's work (2000) on liquid modernity and used the metaphor of *gaseous society* to illustrate the idea of individual freedom, which is however entangled with a difficulty in consolidating a collective experience:

I think a structure that associates the workers is necessary... I have always entertained this idea. But I think we should create new forms. Because it's not even a *liquid society* anymore... I would call it a *gaseous society* at this point. We are no longer particles that, put in a container, stay together. We are particles that have now evaporated from the container... to keep us close you should put us in a container hermetically sealed. Because we tend to go everywhere, which is beautiful, but it also means that we don't know how to help each other, how to create a new mutual aid.

Most of the interviewees welcomed the idea of new forms of collectivism as a response to job insecurity and the individualising effects of the labor process, but they did not consider the extant collective representation as being able to assist their hybrid condition. When we addressed the issue of institutional representation, all interviewees, except for three, described trade unions as well as employer organisations as distant actors, not perceived as being able to represent their interests. Roberto (30, laboratory chemist) summarized this position:

For 40 years unions have based their work on employees with permanent jobs. But who has ever seen a permanent job! We need to change... it's a matter of changing paradigm, Kuhn would say... we need to change paradigm! That model of employment relations doesn't work anymore. We must change it! But they don't get it...

Research participants generally did not refuse collective representation, rather they often expressed their need for it. What they rejected was the current model of industrial relations, which in their view has not understood how work and employment have changed in the last decades. In their narratives, not only does the system of collective bargaining and the rigid contraposition of employers and unions need to be challenged, but so do the dominant narratives about solo self-employed workers more generally. For example, Paolo (35, social media expert) explicitly challenged the dichotomous cultural frame representing self-employed workers either as victimised precarious workers, forced to be self-employed and without margins of autonomy, or as heroic entrepreneurs and thus capable of dealing individually with any sort of risk:

Nowadays everyone's talking about precarious self-employed workers. But how? "Ah poor, a precarious worker, what a loser..." It's a bit like the starving children of Biafra in the '80s, when they used to say: "Think of the children in Biafra and eat everything up". That's a rather pietistic attitude that doesn't lead anywhere. Because, yes, it's true, there are a lot of hassles in being self-employed, but also a huge amount of freedom... The problem is that there are those who say, left parties and unions included, that only employees need to be protected, and that solo self-employed should revert to an employee status. And if you don't want to become an employee, then it means you are an

entrepreneur... which is a nonsense. Do you think I am an entrepreneur? How is it possible that we are not able to imagine anything else outside these two boxes?

In Paolo's interview, as well as in others conducted with highly qualified self-employed workers, there is an effort to represent their condition outside of simplified and dichotomous narratives. On the one hand, there are cultural repertoires that describe self-employed workers without employees as the new victims of the growing precarization. On the other hand, there is the narrative which represents them as a symbol of entrepreneurial attitudes and the driving force of economic and social innovation. These are both representations in which research participants struggled to recognise themselves, also finding difficulty in positioning their experience within traditional class relations. Giulia (34, journalist), for example, described her condition of being a highly qualified solo self-employed worker as:

It's a condition to which no one gives voice. Being highly educated, living in a condition which is, I don't say below the poverty line, but almost, though not the poverty line of a Pakistani immigrant who's been here for six months, but a condition with a good standard of living, all things considered. Because I have a computer and all the technological stuff. It is an odd situation that nobody really cares about. Or anyway nobody gives voice to. A voice or voices, or a channel, or an organisation that is somehow not strictly concerned with employment issues, the contractual conditions. Clearly there is also this, but there should be a voice... which speaks, which recounts, which claims, and which denounces this new kind of lifestyle.

A further critical issue adds to the lack of social protection and labor rights for research participants, i.e. the lack of not only collective representation, but also of a collective narrative

in which to identify themselves, in which to recognize their own experience. Giulia's words clearly summarize this position, which concerns the contractual status of self-employed workers, but also their biographical trajectories, their aspirations, and the ways in which their subjectivity is formed. Therefore, it seems to lack a collective narrative which recognises the experience of the growing number of highly qualified solo self-employed workers, who enjoy the flexibility and the freedom of their jobs, but at the same time claim more rights in terms of social protection. A narrative able to avoid the stereotypical images of the precarious worker without agency, depicted as a victim to be protected, and of the all-powerful entrepreneur. One of the main elements of the individualization process, in fact, heightens the subjective perception of isolation, to the detriment of a social and collective identity.

Discussion: The Hybridization of Self-employment

Three main interlinked threads of enquiry evolve from the findings illustrating how highly educated workers experience self-employment in Italy.

Firstly, these workers have to cope with a lack of social protection and with the erosion of the quality of self-employment (Conen and Schippers, 2019; Cordova, 1986). Their position then becomes hybrid because – due to their legal status and their relatively low incomes – solo self-employed workers often accept other jobs (typically low skilled) as self-employed or as employees, or engage in informal economic activities. Secondly, their condition becomes hybrid as the boundaries between work, leisure and private spheres are increasingly blurring. This phenomenon concerns not only the lack of distinction between the times (and places) of life and work, which have always been typical of self-employment. It rather relates to the construction of identity, and their passion for the job, that leads workers to not distinguish between work and leisure, between their free time and their profession, and can result in them

agreeing to work for free. Thirdly, this growing category of highly educated solo self-employed workers challenges the ideological discourses about self-employment and is looking for alternative narratives in order to hybridise the cultural frames on precariousness and entrepreneurship that tend to create two fictitious groups of self-employed workers: the precarious workers hired on a self-employed contract only because this was the cheapest option for the employer, on the one hand; and the independent professionals able to manage entrepreneurial risk, on the other.

The national context is key to explaining the difficulties almost all participants had to face because of the lack of social protection. In fact, not only in Italy self-employment is 8 percentage points higher than the EU-28 average, but the main difference is precisely related to solo self-employment (16% of all workers in Italy and 11% in Europe, in 2015). Firstly, in the Italian context they are highly concentrated in the skilled part of the labour force. Secondly, social protection for the self-employed is much more relevant in Italy than in most European countries. In particular, the self-employed have limited protections especially in the fields of sickness benefits, unemployment benefits, family benefits and pensions (Jessoula et al., 2017). To this is added a gradual decrease in the income of self-employed workers. From 2006 to 2015 the gross annual income from self-employment experienced a fluctuating trend, settling on an average of €22,952 in 2016, with significant gender and territorial differences (Istat, 2017). The data, however, aggregates very different categories: from entrepreneurs with employees, to ‘traditional independent professionals’ (accountants, lawyers, doctors, etc.), to non-regulated self-employed workers, who are at the core of this article. In particular, among solo self-employment, new high level educated professions have arisen alongside traditional forms of non-dependent work. This is the result of major changes in contractual regulations and in the position of the self-employed worker in the organisational and productive structure of the commissioning enterprise. Therefore, how research participants construct their positions

as self-employed workers necessarily reflects structural factors, and particularly important here is the extremely limited access of self-employed workers from benefits in case of illness or parenthood. In this scenario, economic resources and parental support can be crucial. However, research participants also demonstrate their ability to exercise their agency and activate other resources to enable their pursuit of their aspirations. Indeed, the case of highly educated self-employed workers highlights the tension between structural factors and agency.

The narratives that were constructed by the research participants for motivation and that pushed them to maintain and strengthen their self-employed worker's position were mainly those of passion and autonomy. Thus, on the one hand, interviewees expressed a sense of fragmentation of their professional experience, of individualization, uncertainty and economic difficulty. On the other hand, however, they described their work as responding to their passions and the result of their creative expression. What they described is a *free work*, in its ambivalence of free and at the same time unpaid work (Armano and Murgia, 2019; Pulignano, 2019), in which subjects are remunerated in terms of identity even more than economically. The subjectivities of the interviewed highly educated solo self-employed workers, therefore, oscillate between an economic/contractual and a symbolic/identity dimension. Identification in work, which is strongly linked with the desire for autonomy and management of their own time, can meet the most intimate and emotional aspirations, but can at the same time become a source of self-exploitation, with the impossibility of tracing the boundaries between work and private lives. In this way, the conditions of solo self-employed workers also become hybrid because of the difficulty of defining the limits of professional activity, in a process that makes the private and leisure spheres productive places as well. Identification in work, then, acts as a device that transforms the subjectivities of emerging groups of self-employed workers. At the same time, to nurture the identity dimension, research participants have to adopt different strategies that allow them to support their career as self-employed. This is the way in which all

available resources are put on the market: the few who have inherited a house are trying to rent a room in order to guarantee a fixed monthly income; those who can play a musical instrument or practice a sport try to make out of it a job, almost always in the informal economy; those who cannot benefit from economic or family support, and have no hobbies that can become profitable, look for other forms of employment, sometimes very distant from those in which they recognize themselves and that are instrumental to their economic support. Therefore, self-employment becomes hybrid from a contractual point of view, as highly qualified self-employed workers are often employed at the same time as employees or with other self-employed contracts, typically not consistent with their qualifications. However, they have multiple jobs not because they collaborate with a range of clients, but mainly because they hold a second job in order to support what they consider to be the 'real' one.

Such hybrid conditions affect and are affected by the lack of cultural repertoires able to represent these working trajectories and by the hybridisation of the dominant narratives on the new forms of self-employment. The fact that highly educated workers, despite the growing level of insecurity, are less and less interested in being employed in a standard employment situation is not a new phenomenon. In an attempt to build a career that makes sense for them, research participants were willing to accept a sort of trade-off that makes more secure (and often better remunerated) employments incompatible with jobs that are a source of satisfaction and identity remuneration. What is interesting in their narratives is that they identified the cultural frames of both precariousness and entrepreneurship as obsolete, ideologised, and otherwise not able to capture their experience. The narrative of precariousness depicts workers as precarious victims to be protected and deprives them of any form of agency. The narrative of entrepreneurship wants them to be self-entrepreneurs, creators of their destiny, and personally responsible for any professional 'success' or 'failure'. In this scenario, the interviewees did not just miss collective representation in respect of negotiating pay and

accessing social protection. They also missed alternative cultural frames, as well as a new collective narrative, where the subjects can position themselves and find novel identifications, also beyond contractual forms of employment and beyond dichotomous cultural frames representing self-employed workers either as precarious workers or as entrepreneurs.

Conclusion

Research on solo self-employment has widely emphasised the blurring boundaries between independent self-employment and dependent employment as the core components of major revisions of labour and social security law restrictions for these specific categories of workers (Sciarra, 2004; Supiot, 1999). This is because, from an institutional perspective, these work arrangements are not based on employment contracts, but rather on private contracts that place the workers beyond the scope of labour laws, even though the actual conditions of work are similar to those of regular employees. More generally, the changing boundaries of modern corporations (Vallas, 2017; Weils, 2014) foster new social and institutional conditions that enable the development of solo self-employed arrangements. This includes the way in which self-employed workers are considered neither clearly separate from – nor clearly integrated with – the firm they are contracted with (Muehlberger and Bertolini, 2008).

We have shown that solo self-employment is socially constructed as hybrid by using a subject-oriented approach (Armano and Murgia, 2013; Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 1996), which systematically takes into account reciprocal impacts between individuals and social structures. The focus on the dynamic connections between subjects and social forces has allowed us to discuss how subjects are affected by social norms and institutions, but also how they can shape them. This approach has highlighted the multiple elements of the process of hybridisation of self-employment.

Looking at the labour market dynamics, we have observed how solo self-employment becomes hybrid from a contractual point of view. Under the same work arrangement, in fact, very different labour force participants co-exist: from independent professionals, to economically dependent self-employed, to ‘false self-employed’ workers. Moreover, these categories are not mutually exclusive, since the same individual may experience different self-employed positions at the same time, as well as other kinds of employment, including wage jobs and the informal economy (Bögenhold and Klinglmair, 2017; Folta et al., 2010).

Engagement in different working activities is often the result of an attempt to sustain a self-employed career that is not a sufficient source of income. Especially among highly qualified solo self-employed workers, we have observed a sort of identification of the self with working activities, which can lead people to accept poorly paid jobs, and in some cases even to work for free (Franette, 2013; Hesmondhalgh and Baker, 2012; Ross, 2009). Therefore, the mechanism of subjects’ identification with their working activities creates hybrid working conditions because of the blurring boundaries between life and work, and between passions and professions. Moreover, the fact that several of the research participants embraced the rhetoric of ‘career management’, based on individualistic meritocracy (Lane, 2001), but were at the same time worried about the discontinuity of their income and the uncertainty of their careers (Armano and Murgia, 2017), entails a contradictory process of self-construction centred on individualisation (Beck, 1992; Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 1996; Honneth, 2004).

Finally, the analysis also shows the hybridisation of the narratives on solo self-employment, which are challenging the contraposition between precarious self-employed workers and micro-entrepreneurs. Firstly, we observed a demand of collective representation in respect of accessing social protection. Solo self-employed workers, in fact, encounter difficulties in being represented by the traditional system of interest representation and are only recently approaching emerging freelancers’ organisations and cooperatives (Bologna,

2018; Jansen, 2017; Murgia and de Heusch, 2020). This is particularly marked in the Italian context, where employers' associations currently focus mainly on the self-employed with employees, and the main trade union recognised the importance of protecting workers, whether employed or self-employed, only very recently. Secondly, we showed the need to identify with a collective cultural elaboration able to give voice to the hybrid position of solo self-employed workers. In questioning the dominant narratives and the available cultural repertoires (Lamont, 1992), we discussed the key role of the agency enacted by the interviewed solo self-employed when refusing to represent themselves either as entrepreneurs (du Gay, 1996) or as a part of the precariat (Standing, 2011), by constructing alternative self-representations that are shaped around the thorny autonomy-passion bond, without denying the risks of precariousness that they are exposed to.

From a theoretical point of view, this article also shows that an integration of legal, structural and cultural sociological concepts is useful in analysing how workers experience this work, including the way in which it is regulated. This has some analytical implications for the understanding of recent processes of marketisation and neo-liberalisation, which are intertwined with aspects such as configurations of cultural and subjective processes. The latter identify ways through which individuals become normalised and socially governed while also highlighting their agency when questioning and resisting the dominant (discursive) polarisation of precarious workers and micro-entrepreneurs. Subjects may in fact adhere to the hegemonic narratives, but they may also enact instrumental strategies, and even refuse the dominant cultural frames (Collinson, 2003; Vallas and Christin, 2017).

Exploring the subjective experience of 'hybrid self-employed workers' may be an original avenue for future research on self-employment. Moreover, whether the need for a 'voice' expressed by solo self-employed workers will support the construction of a collective identity and of emerging forms of collective representation remains a crucial question to be

addressed in order to understand how new practices of organising can be articulated in the growing hybrid areas of work.

Acknowledgments

The authors would like to thank the interviewees for their participation in this study. They wish to express gratitude also to Steve Vallas for his insightful suggestions and the anonymous reviewers for their constructive comments on the early versions of this article. The analysis is based on the research projects ‘SHARE – Seizing the Hybrid Areas of work by Representing self-Employment’ (grant agreement N. 715950) and ‘REsPecTMe – Resolving Precariousness: Advancing the Theory and Measurement of Precariousness across the paid/unpaid work continuum’ (grant agreement N. 833577), which have been both funded from the European Research Council (ERC) under the European Union’s Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme.

References

- Adams Z, Deakin S (2014) Institutional Solutions to Precariousness and Inequality in Labour Markets. *British Journal of Industrial Relations* 52(4): 779–809.
- Armano A, Murgia A (2019) *Travail gratuit*. In Bureau M-C, Corsani A, Giraud O, Rey F (eds) *Les zones grises des relations de travail et d’emploi: un dictionnaire sociologique*. Buenos Aires: Teseo 543–552.
- Armano A, Murgia A (2017) Hybrid areas of work in Italy Hypotheses to interpret the transformations of precariousness and subjectivity. In Armano E, Bove A and Murgia A

- (eds) *Mapping Precariousness Labour Insecurity and Uncertain Livelihoods: Subjectivities and Resistance* London: Routledge, 47–59.
- Armano E, Murgia A (2013) The precariousnesses of young knowledge workers: A subject-oriented approach. *Global Discourse* 3(3–4): 486–501.
- Azaïs C (2019) *Hybridation*. In Bureau M-C, Corsani A, Giraud O, Rey F (eds) *Les zones grises des relations de travail et d'emploi: un dictionnaire sociologique*. Buenos Aires: Teseo, 213–225.
- Barley G, Kunda S (2004) *Gurus hired guns and warm bodies: Itinerant experts in a knowledge economy*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Beck U (2000) *The brave new world of work*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Beck U (1992) *The risk society: Toward a new modernity*. Thousand Oaks CA: Sage.
- Beck U, Beck-Gernsheim E (1996) Individualization and 'Precarious Freedoms': Perspectives and controversies of a subject-oriented sociology. In Helas P, Lash S and Morris P (eds) *Detraditionalisation Critical reflections on authority and identity*. Cambridge: Blackwell, 23–48.
- Beck U, Giddens A, and Lash S (1994) *Reflexive modernization*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Beck U, Bonss W, and Lau C (2003) The theory of reflexive modernization: Problematic hypotheses and research programme. *Theory culture and society* 20(2): 1–33.
- Bögenhold D, Klinglmair A (2017) One-person enterprises and the phenomenon of hybrid self-employment: evidence from an empirical study. *Empirica* 44(2): 383–404.
- Bögenhold D, Staber U (1991) The decline and rise of self-employment. *Work Employment and Society* 5(2): 223–239.
- Bologna S (2018) *The rise of the European self-employed workforce*. Milano: Mimesis.
- Boltanski L, Chiappello E (1999) *Le nouvel esprit du capitalisme*. Paris: Gallimard.

- Borghi P, Murgia A (2019) Between Precariousness and Freedom: The Ambivalent Condition of Independent Professionals in Italy. In Conen W and Schippers J (eds) *Self-Employment as Precarious Work: a European perspective*. London: Palgrave, 132–152.
- Bureau MC, Dieuaide P (2018) Institutional change and transformations in labour and employment standards: an analysis of ‘grey zones’. *Transfer: European Review of Labour and Research* 24(3): 261–277.
- Buschoff KS, Schmidt C (2009) Adapting labour law and social security to the needs of the ‘new selfemployed’—comparing the UK Germany and the Netherlands. *Journal of European Social Policy* 19(2): 147–159.
- Butler J (1997) *Excitable speech: a politics of the performative* London: Routledge.
- Charmaz K (2006) *Constructing grounded theory: A practiceal guide through qualitative analysis*. Thousand Oaks CA: Sage.
- Chiapello E, Fairclough N (2002) Understanding the new management ideology: a transdisciplinary contribution from critical discourse analysis and new sociology of capitalism. *Discourse and society* 13(2): 185–208.
- Collinson D (2003) Identities and insecurities: Selves at work. *Organization* 10(3): 527–547.
- Conen W, Schippers J (eds) (2019) *Self-Employment as Precarious Work: a European perspective*. London: Palgrave.
- Conen WS, Schippers JJ, and Schulze Buschoff K (2016) *Self-Employed without Personnel Between Freedom and Insecurity*. Düsseldorf: Hans Böckler Foundation.
- Cordova E (1986) From full-time wage employment to atypical employment: A major shift in the evolution of labour relations. *Int'l Lab Rev* 125: 641–657.
- D’Amours M, Legault MJ (2013) Highly skilled workers and employment risks: Role of institutions. *Labor Studies Journal* 38(2): 89–109.
- du Gay P (1996) *Consumption and identity at work*. Thousand Oaks CA: Sage.

- Dupuy Y, Larré F (1998) Entre salariat et travail indépendant: les formes hybrides de mobilisation du travail. *Travail et emploi* (77): 1–14.
- Eurofound (2017) *Exploring self-employment in the European Union*. Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union.
- Eurofound (2013) *Self-Employed or Not Self-Employed? Working Conditions of 'Economically Dependent Workers'*. Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union.
- Eurostat (2017) *Labour Force Survey*. Luxembourg: Eurostat Database.
- Florida R (2002) *The rise of the creative class and how it's transforming work leisure community and everyday life*. New York NY: Basic Books.
- Folta TB, Delmar F, and Wennberg K (2010) Hybrid entrepreneurship. *Management Science* 56(2): 253–269.
- Fraser J, Gold M (2001) 'Portfolio workers': Autonomy and control amongst freelance translators. *Work Employment and Society* 15(4): 679–697.
- Frenette A (2013) Making the intern economy: Role and career challenges of the music industry intern *Work and Occupations* 40(4): 364–397.
- Gherardi S, Murgia A (2013) By hook or by crook: temporary workers between exploration and exploitation. *Research in the Sociology of Organizations* 37: 75–103.
- Gill R (2002) Cool creative and egalitarian? Exploring gender in project-based new media work in Euro. *Information Communication and Society* 5: 70–89.
- Hatton E (2011) *The temp economy: From Kelly girls to permatemps in postwar America*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.
- Hesmondhalgh D, Baker S (2010) 'A very complicated version of freedom': Conditions and experiences of creative labour in three cultural industries. *Poetics* 38(1): 4–20.
- Hipp L, Bernhardt J, and Allmendinger J (2015) Institutions and the prevalence of nonstandard employment. *Socio-Economic Review* 13(2): 351–377.

- Hipple SF, Hammond L A (2016) *Self-Employment in the United States*. BLS Spotlight on Statistics.
- Ho K (2009) *Liquidated: an ethnography of Wall Street*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Honneth A (2004) Organized self-realization: Some paradoxes of individualization. *European Journal of Social Theory* 7(4): 463–478.
- Hughes KD (2003) Pushed or pulled? Women's entry into self-employment and small business ownership. *Gender Work and Organization* 10(4): 433–454.
- Hyman R, Gumbrell-McCormick R (2017) Resisting labour market insecurity: Old and new actors rivals or allies?. *Journal of Industrial Relations* 59(4): 538–561.
- Istat (2017) *Condizioni di vita reddito e carico fiscale delle famiglie*. Roma: Istat.
- Istat (2016) *Noi Italia 2016 100 statistiche per capire il Paese in cui viviamo*. Roma: Istat.
- Jansen G (2017) Solo self-employment and membership of interest organizations in the Netherlands: Economic social and political determinants. *Economic and industrial democracy* 0143831X17723712.
- Jansen G (2016) Self-employment as atypical or autonomous work: diverging effects on political orientations. *Socio-Economic Review* 101093/ser/mww017.
- Jessoula M, Pavolini E, and Strati F (2017) *ESPN Thematic Report on Access to social protection of people working as self-employed or on non-standard contracts – Italy*. Brussels: European Commission.
- Kalleberg AL (2012) Job quality and precarious work clarifications controversies and challenges. *Work and Occupations* 39(4): 427–448.
- Kalleberg AL (2009) Precarious work insecure workers: Employment relations in transition. *American sociological review* 74(1): 1–22.
- Kalleberg AL (2000) Nonstandard employment relations: Part-time temporary and contract work. *Annual Review of Sociology* 26: 341–365.

- Kalleberg AL, Berg I (1987) *Work and industry*. New York and London: Plenum.
- Kalleberg AL, Vallas SP (2018) Probing precarious work: Theory research and politics. *Research in the Sociology of Work* 31: 1–30.
- Kallinikos J (2003) Work human agency and organizational forms: an anatomy of fragmentation. *Organization studies* 24(4): 595–618.
- Lamont M (1992) *Money Morals and Manners: The Culture of the French and American Upper-Middle Class*. London: Chicago Press.
- Lane C (2011) *A Company of One: Insecurity Independence and the New World of White Collar Unemployment*. Ithaca: ILR Press.
- Leighton P (2015) Independent professionals: legal issues and challenges. *International Review of Entrepreneurship* 13(2): 81–92.
- Lewchuk W (2017) Precarious jobs: Where are they and how do they affect well-being?. *The Economic and Labour Relations Review* 28(3): 402–419.
- Mason P (2013) *Why It's Kicking Off Everywhere: The New Global Revolutions*. London: Verso.
- Miur (2017) Focus *Gli immatricolati nell'aa 2015-2016 Il passaggio dalla scuola all'università dei diplomati nel 2016*. Roma: Miur.
- Muehlberger U, Bertolini S (2008) The organizational governance of work relationships between employment and self-employment. *Socio-Economic Review* 6(3): 449–72.
- Muehlberger U, Pasqua S (2009) Workers on the Border between Employment and Self-employment. *Review of Social Economy* 67(2): 201–228.
- Muffels RJ (ed) (2008) *Flexibility and employment security in Europe Labour Markets in Transition*. Cheltenham: Edward Elgar Publishing.

- Murgia A, de Heusch S (2020) 'It started with the artists and now it concerns everyone': The case of Smart a cooperative of 'salaried autonomous workers'. In Taylor S and Luckman S (eds) *Pathways into Creative Working Lives* London: Palgrave.
- Osnowitz D (2010) *Freelancing expertise: Contract professionals in the new economy*. New York: Cornell University Press.
- Osnowitz D, Henson K D (2016) Leveraging limits for contract professionals: Boundary work and control of working time. *Work and Occupations* 43(3): 326–360.
- Perulli A (2017) Il Jobs Act Degli Autonomi: Nuove (E Vecchie) Tutele per Il Lavoro Autonomo Non Imprenditoriale. *Rivista Italiana Di Diritto Del Lavoro* 2: 173–201.
- Pink D (2001) *Free agent nation: How America's new independent workers are transforming the way we live*. New York: Warner Books.
- Prosser T (2016) Dualisation or Liberalisation? Investigating Precarious Work in Eight European Countries. *Work Employment and Society* 30(6): 949–965.
- Pugh AJ (2015) *The tumbleweed society: Working and caring in an age of insecurity*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Pulignano V (2019) *Work in Deregulated Labour Markets: A Research Agenda for Precariousness*. ETUI Working Papers Series.
- Pulignano V (2018) Precarious work regime of competition and the case of Europe. *Research in the Sociology of Work* 31: 33–60.
- Pulignano V, Doerflinger N (2013) A head with two tales: trade unions' influence on temporary agency work in Belgian and German workplaces. *International Journal of Human Resource Management* 22(24): 4149–4165.
- Pulignano V, Doerflinger N, and Keune M (2017) Re-introducing the company in the analysis of labour market dualisation: Variety of patterns and diversity of outcomes between

standard and non-standard workers in multinational subsidiaries in Belgium Germany and Britain. *Economic and Industrial Democracy* 0143831X17731610.

Ranci C (2012) *Partite Iva Il lavoro autonomo nella crisi italiana*. Bologna: Il Mulino.

Reyneri E (1998) Le nuove forme di lavoro tra rischi di precarietà e bisogni di autonomia: note introduttive alla situazione italiana. *Sociologia del lavoro* 69: 17–31.

Romàn C, Congregado E, and Millàn JM (2011) Dependent Self-Employment as a way to evade employment protection legislation. *Small Business Economics* 37(3): 363–392.

Ross A (2009) *Nice Work If You Can Get It: Life and Labor in Precarious Times*. New York: NYU Press.

Schippers J (2019) Labour market flexibility self-employment and precariousness. In: Conen W and Schippers J (eds) *Self-Employment as Precarious Work: a European perspective*. London: Palgrave 23–39.

Sciarra S (2004) *The Evolution of Labour Law (1992–2004)*. General Report Brussels: Project for the European Commission.

Sennett R (1998) *The corrosion of character: The personal consequences of work in the new capitalism*. New York: WW Norton.

Sharone O (2013) *Flawed system/flawed self: Job searching and unemployment experiences*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Smeaton D (2003) Self-employed workers: calling the shots or hesitant independents? A consideration of the trends. *Work employment and society* 17(2): 379–391.

Smith V (2010) Enhancing employability: Human cultural and social capital in an era of turbulent unpredictability. *Human Relations* 63(2): 279–300.

Standing G (2011) *The precariat: The new dangerous class*. London: Bloomsbury.

- Stone K (2013) The decline in the standard employment contract: a review of the evidence. In Stone K and Arthurs H (eds) *Rethinking Workplace Regulation: Beyond the Standard Contract of Employment*. New York: Sage, 366–404.
- Supiot A (1999) *Au delà de l'emploi: transformation du travail et l'avenir du droit du travail en Europe*. Paris: Flammarion.
- Tempest S, Starkey K (2004) The effects of liminality on individual and organizational learning. *Organization Studies* 25(4): 507–527.
- Thurik AR, Carree MA, Van Stel A, and Audretsch DB (2008) Does self-employment reduce unemployment?. *Journal of Business Venturing* 23(6): 673–686.
- Umney C, Kretsos L (2015) “That’s the Experience” Passion Work Precarity and Life Transitions Among London Jazz Musicians. *Work and Occupations* 42(3): 313–334.
- Vallas S (2017) *In the Shadow of the Market: Flexible Capitalism and the Crisis of Work*. Inaugural Lecture Franqui Leerstoel KU Leuven September.
- Vallas S, Christin A (2017) Work and Identity in an Era of Precarious Employment: How Workers Respond to “Personal Branding” Discourse. *Work and Occupations* doi: 0730888417735662.
- Vallas S, Prener C (2012) Dualism job polarization and the social construction of precarious work. *Work and Occupations* 39(4): 331–353.
- Van Stel A, Wennekers S, and Scholman G (2014) Solo self-employed versus employer entrepreneurs: determinants and macro-economic effects in OECD countries. *Eurasian Business Review* 4(1): 107-136.
- Vosko L (2010) *Managing the Margins: Gender Citizenship and the International Regulation of Precarious Employment*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Vosko LF, Zukewich N, and Cranford C (2003) Precarious jobs: A new typology of employment. *Perspectives on labour and income* 15(4).

Weil D (2014) *The Fissured Workplace: Why Work Became So Bad for So Many and What Can Be Done to Improve It*. Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press.

Williams CC, Horodnic IA (2018) Evaluating the prevalence and distribution of dependent self-employment: some lessons from the European Working Conditions Survey. *Industrial Relations Journal* 49(2): 109–127.

Annex 1 – Interviewees’ characteristics

Name	Sex	Age	Job	City	Employment contract
Eleonora	W	33	Editing	Milan	Solo self-employed / VAT
Greta	W	31	Independent researcher	Milan	Solo self-employed / VAT
Stefania	W	28	Social media developer	Milan	Solo self-employed / Project work
Alice	W	30	Administrative staff	Milan	Solo self-employed / Project work and VAT
Matilde	W	33	IT sector	Milan	Solo self-employed / VAT
	W	36	Archaeologist	Milan	Solo self-employed / Project work
Lara	W	33	Translator	Milan	Solo self-employed / VAT
Sabrina	W	33	Educator	Milan	Solo self-employed / Project work
Massimo	M	31	Interpreter	Milan	Solo self-employed / VAT
Fabio	M	34	Expert in the diffusion of scientific knowledge	Milan	Solo self-employed / VAT
Andrea	M	31	Journalist	Milan	Solo self-employed / VAT
Carlo	M	33	Member of a cooperative dealing with environmental heritage	Milan	Solo self-employed / VAT
Matteo	M	32	Cultural events’ organiser	Milan	Solo self-employed / Project work
Giovanni	M	30	IT sector	Milan	Solo self-employed / VAT
Paolo	M	32	Social media expert	Milan	Solo self-employed / VAT
Luca	M	37	Journalist	Milan	Solo self-employed / VAT
Simona	W	33	Expert in gender policies	Bologna	Solo self-employed / Project work
Valentina	W	31	Teacher in a secondary private school	Bologna	Solo self-employed / Project work
Susanna	W	31	Editing	Bologna	Solo self-employed / Project work
Caterina	W	33	Web designer	Bologna	Solo self-employed / Project work - Temporarily unemployed
Giulia	W	34	Journalist	Bologna	Solo self-employed / VAT
Silvia	W	33	Educator	Bologna	Solo self-employed / Project work
Elisa	W	31	Vocational trainer	Bologna	Solo self-employed / Project work

Marco	M	32	Copywriter	Bologna	Solo self-employed / Project work - Temporarily unemployed
Roberto	M	30	Laboratory chemist	Bologna	Solo self-employed / Project work
Lorenzo	M	28	Employed by an insurance company	Bologna	Solo self-employed / VAT
Omar	M	31	Cultural events' organiser	Bologna	Solo self-employed / VAT
Giorgio	M	37	Social policy	Bologna	Solo self-employed / VAT
Emanuele	M	31	Graphic designer	Bologna	Solo self-employed / Project work
Renato	M	29	Translator	Bologna	Solo self-employed / Project work
Alessio	M	31	IT sector	Bologna	Solo self-employed / VAT
Viola	W	35	Translator	Bologna	Solo self-employed / Project work
Sofia	W	34	Administrative staff	Trento	Solo self-employed / Project work
Sara	W	30	Archaeologist	Trento	Solo self-employed / Project work - Temporarily unemployed
Linda	W	30	Project manager of EU projects	Trento	Solo self-employed / Project work
Arianna	W	29	Independent researcher	Trento	Solo self-employed / Project work
Barbara	W	33	Social media expert	Trento	Solo self-employed / Project work
Azzurra	W	34	Independent researcher	Trento	Solo self-employed / Project work
Cristina	W	36	Trainer	Trento	Solo self-employed / VAT
Veronica	W	39	Cultural events' organiser	Trento	Solo self-employed / Project work
Miriam	W	29	Expert in Urban security	Trento	Solo self-employed / Project work
Giada	W	32	Archaeologist	Trento	Solo self-employed / VAT
Anna	M	30	Museum worker	Trento	Solo self-employed / Project work
Edoardo	M	34	Administrative staff	Trento	Solo self-employed / Project work - Temporarily unemployed
Riccardo	M	33	IT sector	Trento	Solo self-employed / Project work
Michele	M	34	Architect	Trento	Solo self-employed / VAT

Leonardo	M	29	Laboratory analyst	Trento	Solo self-employed / Project work
Franco	M	31	Museum worker	Trento	Solo self-employed / Project work
Nicola	M	36	Editing	Trento	Solo self-employed / VAT
Giuseppe	M	31	Financial consultant	Trento	Solo self-employed / VAT - Temporarily unemployed
Angelo	M	32	Project management	Trento	Solo self-employed / Project work