

Self-employment in historical macro-micro perspective

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Global Collaboratory on the History of Labour Relations Workshop

International Institute of Social History, Amsterdam

Introduction

The Global Collaboratory on the History of Labour Relations is organizing a series of workshops on shifting labour relations in the world over the past five centuries. This workshop is the fourth in the series and focuses on shifts in and out of self-employment. Self-employment is an interesting labour relation, as self-employment allows people to earn a living, while to a large extent surpassing (im)plicit expectations about, for example, educational training and past experience, that usually are required to obtain a position on the labour market. While in some instances self-employment is intentional, not seldom self-employment is the result of exclusion from the labour market, for example due to sex, ethnicity or religion. Nevertheless in both the voluntary and involuntary case, self-employment provides access to means of living when regulated access to the labour market is impaired.

The advantage of self-employment, avoiding (in)formal regulations to attain access to means of living, is juxtaposed with the disadvantage of not being able to call on the benefits that these labour market regulations provide. Part of the current debate on the increasing number of self-employed focuses on their relatively deprived positions, as self-employed are less likely to afford mortgages or pension plans, a result of their unregulated and therefore unsecure labour market position. While from a historical perspective mortgages and pension plans can be regarded as luxuoury goods unattainable by the masses, it appears that in every society, self-employment as a way to escape (in)formal labour market regulations is juxtaposed with the lack of security that such regulations provide.

In comparative studies of the evolution of labour relations in the West and the Global South, self-employment appears to become a critical turning point. In the United States and Western Europe labour relations gradually shifted from reciprocal, tributary and unfree labour towards wage labour, the latter partially dissovling into self-employment only in the twentieth century. Traditionally the Global South has been expected to follow this pattern. Mistakenly though, for after the period of colonization with intensive wage labour, self-employment already increased in the Global South in the 19th century. Thus the trend towards self-employment in the West is now following up on the trend in the Global South. It is the mechanisms behind a reverse in trends like this is that the Global Collaboratory of the History of Labour Relations is interested in describing and explaining using the taxonomy.

For their study the Global Collaboratory on the History of Labour Relations uses a taxonomy to distinguish between 19 different labour relations (see Figure 1)xxx. Self-employed are represented in group 12a ‘Self-employed leading producers’ and 12b ‘Self-employed kin producers’. Self-employed leading producers are those who produce goods or services for the market, while having three or less employees. When these employees are household members of the self-employed leading producer, they are considered to be self-employed kin producers. (Non-related employees are considered as wage earners for the market (14)).

The workshop at hand focuses on explaining what circumstances at the macro level (national, regional, city, social networks) and what characteristics on the individual level create opportunities and barriers for the push into or out of self-employment. For example, due to government regulation or crises, entry to or maintaining one’s position at the labour market may become more difficult forcing people into self-employment in order to earn a living. As another example, some people will have long term goals to go into self-employment, but first will need to acquire enough capital. Government regulations or changes in family circumstances may affect the timing of these persons going into self-employment. To study and explain long term trends in self-employment we propose 5 different sessions representing a descending level of abstraction (see table 1).

Session	Topic
Session 1	Mechanisms of shifts in and out of self-employment
Session 2	Macro: shifts in labour relations
Session 3	Micro: shifts in labour relations
Session 4	Social structures of self-employment
Session 5	Self-employed as a life-course strategy

The first session focuses on the theoretical underpinnings of self-employment. It highlights many of the mechanisms related to the juxtaposition of good and bad outcomes as a result of lack of (in)formal rules regarding self-employment. We invite speakers to mostly focus on mechanisms that have been discerned in demographic, economic, geographic political or social domains. Substantively, such mechanisms might explain differences between rural and urban settings, sex-differences in labour relations. In addition, we much welcome studies on mechanisms behind shifts in labour relations either directly, or indirectly through temporal occupation of multiple labour relations.

The second and third session focus on self-employment as an outcome on respectively the macro or micro level. Since historical data often lack the detail to make inferences about individuals, studies focusing on how national or regional averages in self-employment fluctuate are welcomed in session 2. We especially invite contributions that compare several countries or regions, especially if such a comparison is made over time. For session 3, we invite studies that focus on shifts in the influence of mechanisms leading to self-employment. For example, whether the importance of economic or social capital changes over time. While in session 3 the outcome variable should be on the individual level, determinants may be on any level. In that sense, we especially welcome studies that study the interplay of macro and micro determinants of self-employment. As an example of such a study, one could think of how state regulation affects the influence of age or sex on self-employment.

Session four and five are specific instances of respectively session two and three. In session 4 the focus is on how social structures, on whatever macro level (country, region, social network) influences self-employment. We invite researchers to make clear and concise hypotheses, possibly combining several theories to derive and test hypotheses. To illustrate, religious affiliation is linked to social group norms and social structure. These also include norms on work ethic, for example on norms of female labour force participation. Paper givers might focus on how differences between religious groups, or changes in religious affiliation over time, may affect self-employment choices for women or other social groups. Session 5 focus on a particular micro-level phenomenon namely varying levels of exposure to self-employment over the life-course. Here the idea is to study to study changes in the age at which people go into, or out of self-employment, for example, due to by-employment at the age of retirement.

Time	Title	Topic (cross-national = Western)
12.30–14.00	Welcoming lunch	
14.00–14.15	Introduction to the workshop	
Session 1:	Mechanisms of shifts in and out of self-employment	
14.15–15.00	Blanchflower	Contemporary cross-national comparisons
15.00–15.45	Hofmeester / Lucassen	1500–2000 global shifts
16.00–16.45	Bögenhold & Staber	Contemporary cross-national comparisons
16.45–17.30	Moore / Mueller	Canada 1990’s push factors
18.00 -	Drinks and dinner	
Session 2:	Macro: shifts in labour relations	
09.15–09.30	Coffee	
09.30–10.15	Caracausi	Early modern mediterranean
10.15–11.00	Dawson	UK, regional comparison, 1999–2000
11.45–13.00	Fritsch & Wyrwich	Germany, regions, long 20th century
13.00–14.00	Lunch	
Session 3:	Micro: shifts in labour relations	
14.00–14.45	Kessler	Russia, 1700–2000
14.45–15.30	Ajayi-Obe & Parker	UK 1990, BHPS, detailed individual data
15.30–16.00	Coffee	
Session 4:	Self-employed as a life-course strategy	
16.00–17.15	Carroll & Mosakowski	West-Germany, firms,family spells 1960
17.15–18.00	Zijdeman & Stapel?	US, long 20th century, households
19.00 -	Conference dinner	
Session 5	Social structures of self-employment	
09.15–09.30	Coffee	
09.30–10.15	Junfu Zhang (USA) juzhang@clarku.edu	China, 2009–2014, social networks
10.15–11.00	Jan Lucassen – Lipper data	Germany, 1 city, long 18th century
11.45–13.00	W. David Allen (USA, Huntsvill)	US, 1 city, ca. 2000, detailed context
13.00–14.00	Lunch and good bye	