

An invisible history of work. Interview with Sergio Bologna

Sabine Grimm/Klaus Ronneberger

How can you photograph the work of freelances? How can you give visual expression to their physical devastation after many years of working in front of a computer screen? Sergio Bologna posed that question several years ago in an interview. Whilst in the Fordist era there was a long tradition of industrial photography, which documented the diverse forms taken by exploitation, it seems to be virtually impossible to depict the activities of the new self-employed using visual means. The strategies and tactics with which they confront the constraints arising from their status have so far been part of the “invisible history of work” (Bologna). Freelances are confronted with demanding communicative, technical-scientific and commercial standards, but these demands are more or less a private matter, provided that their clients can silently assume that freelances will rise to meet the challenge.

In his writing Sergio Bologna seeks to show the human face of self-employed workers. Bologna has been politically active since the 1960s; he was one of the founders of the Italian Operaist (Workerist) movement and has repeatedly addressed the social organization of work. Whilst he initially developed a theory of the Fordist “mass worker”, the focus of his analyses shifted in the late 1970s. He turned his gaze on the impact of an expanding network economy with atypical employment contracts and flexible working hours, concentrating particularly on the emergence of a new generation of “jobbers”, working with informal or limited-duration contracts, workers who no longer had any prospect of a full-time job. They did not want to give up their freedom and saw Fordist wage-labor as anything but the promise of a better life.

Bologna thus began a study, extending over many years, on the new forms of self-employed work. His research was also to a large extent shaped by a caesura in his own biography. In the early 1980s a politically motivated decision was taken to remove him from his post as professor in Padua and he had to find a new way to earn his living; since then he has worked as a freelance consultant. His studies on post-Fordist working relations would certainly not have come into being in this form without this personal experience.

Bologna presents the viewpoint that independent work also represents liberation, and has the potential to be self-determined, in a nutshell, that it is possible “to produce better ways of life than waged labor”. The Operaist perspective distinguishes his studies from the (industrial-) sociological approaches prevalent in Germany on the phenomenon of the new self-employed.

Whilst most sociological approaches to the new forms of self-employment continue to take the paradigms of waged labor as their starting point, Bologna believes the phenomenon strikes at the core of the foundations of the Fordist society. Neoliberalism threatens to destroy the social and political achievements

of the labor movement. As work moves away from waged labor, it is not only traditional modes of struggle that lose their importance but also individuals' relationship to exploitation and alienation. Self-employed workers are no longer confronted with exploitation exclusively as an "external" relationship of coercion, but must also to an extent ascribe the constraints they face to their "own willingness". And so far they have not had any instruments for resistance that would place them in a position of power similar to that which Fordist mass workers previously enjoyed. The new forms of work bring about such a change in the spatial and temporal organization of work that the interests of freelancers cannot be articulated in the vernacular of trade unions. The principle of making demands no longer pertains in the light of their working conditions.

But how can one conceive of representation and organization of the self-employed, who are often isolated and in precarious situations? For Bologna they do not constitute a new "revolutionary subject"; instead, as in the early labor movement the key issue is initially self-help, a "system of mutual support". In this context he expresses his opposition to the widespread notion that large industrial firms almost automatically generated solidarity among the workforce, whereas egoistic and individualistic behavior patterns are the norm amongst the self-employed. For him attitudes of solidarity are always a product of political socialization processes and must constantly be generated anew.

Sabine Grimm/Klaus Ronneberger: Talk of "destruction of the middle classes" is very much riddled with assumptions, particularly in Germany. Since industrialization this discourse has repeatedly emerged here as a bourgeois-conservative topos in arguments, tinged with an air of cultural pessimism. You reproach left-wing intellectuals for so far not having taken a closer look at the middle class, which also includes their own social situation. What caused you to place the middle classes at the core of your analysis?

Sergio Bologna: I was inspired by my personal experience, contacts with people I met who had the same profession or a comparable lifestyle and standard of living. They struggle with similar problems and in essence enjoy the same opportunities in life and in their careers. I had to do without the entire tradition of the left. "Middle class" was long a term of abuse in that tradition. Later, after communist parties had turned their backs on class struggle and become moderate reformist lobbies, the middle classes became a popular target group of political campaigns; gaining their agreement and support has become the main objective of political propaganda. Basically the left's approach to the middle classes was a neurotic-opportunistic attitude. In contrast, I am simply interested in how to reveal concealed forms of exploitation and in combating injustice and inequalities (e.g. with reference to questions of social security, the pensions system etc.) In the leftist tradition, the middle classes only deserve solidarity when they have reached the end of a process of proletarianization, in other words, when they have become impoverished. I am also interested in discovering the concealed potential for socialization, in order to enable political action in contemporary society and ensure those directly affected can play an active role in the public sphere.

Grimm/Ronneberger: Which social groups do the post-Fordist middle classes encompass? In your theses you don't simply talk about new forms of self-employment, but more precisely about the "second generation of the self-employed", contrasted with traditional freelancers such as doctors, architects or lawyers. And you distinguish between independent freelance work and precarious work.

Bologna: The Italian term "precariato" has a slightly different significance than the notion of the "abgehängtes Prekariat" ("socially-detached precariate"), which has become a buzzword in Germany in the debate on the "Unterschicht" ("lower class"). Differences in systems regulating work often make it difficult to compare particular social classes using the same terms or definitions. In Italy the traditional liberal professions have a form of self-regulation via their professional associations (guilds, chambers). These provide protection from risks for members and in some cases offer better benefits than the general social insurance scheme. Second-generation self-employed workers are members of what are known as "non-regulated professions". Despite fifteen years of mandatory contributions, which have been increased significantly by Prodi's government, they are only eligible for paltry benefits from the social security system. They have no form of self-protection – that is also a consequence of their fragmentation. We distinguish between the self-employed who can move freely on the "skills market", the pseudo self-employed (who work, for example, for a single client and invoice the client every month) and casual workers/jobbers, who experience precarity as a "normal state of affairs". Basically however all these groups are exposed to risk and the insecurity associated with precarisation. A typical feature of the post-Fordist era is to-ing and fro-ing between various different employment relations, which has become necessary to secure one's livelihood: sometimes one is an employee in a wage-based contractual relationship, then self-employed again, then unemployed once more etc. However, there is a situation that is even worse, which was finally put on the agenda by the revolt of French youth in 2006, namely the situation of those who work for free, i.e. making their time and skills available to an anonymous third party for no pay: doing "stages" or internships. This phenomenon particularly affects young well-educated people. I consider that to be a really untenable state of affairs. It is a sign of the decline of our democracy. In Italy this form of exploitation is particularly common among traditional freelancers: in large offices of lawyers or architects, where young graduates work for years unpaid. And that shows how difficult it is to draw rigid boundaries between social groups.

Grimm/Ronneberger: In your description of freelance work you protest repeatedly against the idea of drawing analogies with firms, terms used in common parlance, such as of micro-companies, one-man businesses, the Ich-AG (Me-Plc) etc. You write, "representing the company means learning to talk about success, whereas representing work means rendering visible the effort and difficulties associated with it". The entrepreneurial ideology seems by now to have actually come to dominate societal perception of working relations, from labor market policy via the culture of self-help books right through to the way in

which individuals perceive themselves. What consequences arise from this way of looking at work?

Bologna: The symbolic level is very important in this case, as particular notions of values are associated with symbols. My ideas on this are very simple. To my mind the notion of the “individual as a company” is nonsense, an absurdity. In economics and in European theory of law the concept of the company is always associated with the terms “institution”, “organization”, “complex structure”, with three essential, distinct social roles within this structure: the role of the financier, the role of management and the role of the workforce. If these three social roles are assumed by one and the same person, then we have no right to talk about a “company”. In that case it is independent work, working on one’s own account.

But why do people insist so much on wanting to describe something that is actually “work” as a “company”? Why do statistics institutes persist in maintaining this classification, whose grotesque character is revealed at the very latest when these institutions publish figures on the size of businesses and talk about “average company size”? It is because this conceals an ideological operation. The subjects in question are transferred from the symbolic sphere of work to the symbolic sphere of the company. Perhaps some people actually believe they have managed to make the leap from worker to entrepreneur and have moved from the proletariat to the bourgeoisie. In reality however they are often neither one nor the other.

Grimm/Ronneberger: With your theses you strive to make the reality of independent freelance work visible; the specific perception of space and time associated with this, the altered relationship between the public and the private sphere. To that end you also introduce two concepts; “relational work”, which independent workers invest to establish and maintain business contacts and networks, and the notion of the “domestication of the workplace”. What do you understand by “domestication”?

Bologna: The term was introduced by American sociology and frequently employed in the women’s movement. It simply means that work and private life are increasingly superimposed and ultimately merge, that the biological and cultural rhythms of life and the rhythms of work fuse into one single entity, that working time is no longer regulated by signals determining when it begins and ends. Statistical data confirm that working time in general is becoming extended. The spread of independent work has given rise to a massive extension of the social working day. New technologies have made the main contribution to this development. I am answering your questions whilst sitting on a plane from Berlin to Milan with my laptop on my knees. In a moment I’ll have to stop as we are coming in to land, but I will continue at once as soon as I am on the train taking me from Malpensa airport to the city center. There I will take the underground and, when I get home, if I have time and am not too tired, I’ll switch my computer on again and continue to answer your questions. “Domestication” therefore does not mean home-working or tele-working; it means that work

activities can encroach upon all spaces of private life. There is no longer a specific place devoted specially to carrying out work.

Grimm/Ronneberger: Your empirical studies also included interviews with self-employed people. What impression did you glean of the psycho-social consequences of freelance work? How do your interviewees deal with the permanent risk and insecurity? Did they comment on that?

Bologna: It varies from person to person. The forms of independent freelance work, or rather, to be more precise, work biographies in the post-Fordist era, take on very different shapes. Today a precarious worker may be on the breadline, tomorrow a well-paid consultant and the next minute unemployed with little prospect of re-entering the labor market. The people I interviewed almost all had a high level of professional qualifications, i.e. they were what is called knowledge workers. Three aspects made a profound impression on me, as they cropped up in all the interviews. The problem of risk is not one of them. The first aspect is the low esteem with which such people are treated during the initial job interviews in Italy, whilst in the USA firms are fighting to acquire talents and skills for their companies. The second aspect is the almost complete lack of political or civil commitment among this group; the excuse generally put forward is that they have no time for such engagement. The third aspect is the enormous difference between generations. Graduates who completed their studies in the early 1990s can look back on successful professional careers, with periods in which they worked as employees alternating with independent work. Graduates who completed their studies at the start of this millennium have enormous difficulties in starting out in their profession, even if they have much better qualifications than colleagues ten or fifteen years older. As they cannot find work and are afraid the risky business of becoming self-employed, which seems to be increasingly difficult, they continue their studies, do specialist training or language courses, go abroad, etc.

Grimm/Ronneberger: In your theses you point out the contradiction between the democratic-liberal myth of the knowledge society and the crisis in the school and education system. The foundations for the production of “knowledge workers” no longer exists. The slogans on lifelong learning, initially formulated with emancipatory intent, have been transformed through reduced public expenditure on education into an obligation placed on each individual to keep on organising their own further training. How would you distinguish between that approach and your call for “self-education”? Where can self-education occur?

Bologna: At least three different questions arise in this context. The first relates to the “knowledge society” and “knowledge workers”. A great deal of propaganda has been produced in this respect, creating real myths. Is it correct to say that demand on the labor market focuses on increasingly specialized professional figures processing knowledge? The answer is no, as is apparent at a glance in any statistics on the activities most in demand in modern society. The majority of those are low-skilled forms of work. Certainly the number of people with scientific-technical, humanistic or legal expertise is growing, as a general role, but this group does not represent such a high proportion of the demand for labor

that one could say it shapes our society. People whose basic skills are “relational”, who can communicate well, present themselves convincingly and are self-assured, are, I believe, just as much in demand, even if these people do not have particular know-how.

A further question is whether generally speaking the skills acquired increase or decrease their market value. Do people who have invested in education, successfully completed their studies at good universities, acquired post-graduate degrees, learnt languages derive an advantage from this on the labor market? Unfortunately exactly the opposite seems to be the case in Europe. University graduates have the greatest difficulty in entering the labor market. It is they who are forced to work for free. A cashier, a porter, a waiter, a call center employee may not earn much but they never work for free. To that extent professional skills and university education appear to be becoming less valuable. In Italy there are indications that rather than going to university young people now prefer to do concrete vocational training courses or attend technical institutes, which award diplomas at the end of their courses and 25 per cent of those who nevertheless matriculate throw in the towel in the second year. That may of course be related to the fact that, at least in Italy, universities are tailored to suit the interests of the teaching staff rather than the students, in other words, that the educational system as such is inadequate. Perhaps this is also caused by the nature of demand on the labor market. If an economy such as that in Italy today no longer gains its vitality from innovation, but instead from return on equity, in other words from “unearned income” (to use the English term), it is natural that skills undergo a process of devaluation. What counts is no longer an individual with particular skills, but instead someone who is more flexible, more opportunistic, more prepared to accept compromises, to jeopardize their own human dignity. How is it possible to remedy this? It is not possible; the Western world has opted to drift in this direction and – at present – no social or political force wishes to resist this. One can avoid being utterly steamrolled by this development, for example by developing self-protection networks and in addition, by tapping into “unofficial” knowledge, all the alternative skills that are much more readily accessible nowadays thanks to the Internet.

Grimm/Ronneberger: In the light of the isolation of self-employed workers it is difficult to imagine forms of organization and representation for them. You point out that it is impossible to implement strikes and similar forms of struggle and conclude that only a “system of mutual support”, comparable to self-help in the early workers’ movement, corresponds to the needs of the self-employed. Doesn’t this kind of alliance often stand in contradiction to the entrepreneurial ideology, which many self-employed indeed also adopt, denying their own social situation to themselves and others? Where do you see approaches involving this kind of “mutual support”, with networks that also offer scope to reflect on one’s own situation?

Bologna: That is right, it is very difficult to convince independent workers to meet, to organise themselves, to express their interests collectively. However, it is not impossible. My experience of this in Milan in particular is very interesting. One day a friend of mine, who is also self-employed, drew my attention to a

homepage – <http://www.actainrete.it> . When I connected to the site, I discovered that there had for some time been an association of freelance workers, who had found some food for thought and been encouraged to act thanks to the book on independent work that I published almost ten years ago. On the whole the members were women, who had decided to work freelance to combine their family obligations or their role as mothers with their profession. I joined this association too and we now work together. We are currently involved in a campaign against the tax increases introduced by Prodi's government, which claims that it wants to help the weaker members of society but in reality has exacerbated the difficult situation of atypical workers and the new self-employed. We are also in conflict with the trade unions, above all CGIL, the largest trade union federation, which is supposed to represent "atypical workers" but in fact only defends the interests of pseudo self-employed workers. We have now been joined by a group in Bologna, also composed mainly of women. Some of them were among the founders of the trade union sub-organization of "atypical workers", but subsequently left it. We have now begun to structure our organization to ensure that every new contact contributes to making our discourse more complex. Given the high proportion of female self-employed workers in the association, we have established contacts with feminist groups and activists from the women's movement and will be holding an initial public event with them in December in order to initiate negotiations with the municipal administration in Milan, the province and the region of Lombardy. Working with these groups has meant that we have been able to look in greater depth at some of the topics affecting the women's situation, for example "domestication". In addition, we have also taken a look around and discovered many other groups set up in particular professions to combat precarity and re-establish the value of skills, for example a group of freelance journalists, based in various locations throughout Italy. The topics of information and self-education will be addressed afresh on a totally new basis. What point am I trying to make in narrating all of this? I believe that with this group of self-employed workers, some of whom also voted for Berlusconi at the last election, I am involved in a journey of establishing networks; that is an avenue I also pursued in the past, but this time the topics permeating debates are professional identity and skills. I am very pleased that my writings have once again convinced people to defend their rights, that these texts helped them to gain a better understanding of their own situation.

Grimm/Ronneberger: What significance does the movement of workers in precarious situations have for a political articulation of the new self-employed? What do you consider to be the similarities and differences in terms of your view of the second-generation of self-employed work?

Bologna: The movement of followers of "Saint Precarious" stems from a totally different background. It came into being on the one hand in the social centers (centri sociali), and on the other hand in the environs of the "more creative" groups of the autonomous left-wing movement and the youth proletariat. This movement rapidly gathered an entourage drawn from the whole spectrum of the radical, neo- and post-Communist movements. The PRC, the Partita Comunista Rifondazione (translator's note: the revamped Communist party) has

piggybacked on this movement and will possibly integrate it into its structures. In the last elections important figures from the autonomous centers' movement (centri sociali) were elected to parliament on the PRC list. One of them, for many years the figurehead of the Centro Sociale Leoncavallo in Milan, has even become deputy chairman of the parliamentary committee on judicial issues. I would say that the movement of followers of St. Precarious is highly politicized, with public-sector workers playing an important role in the movement: people in precarious employment in schools, hospitals, municipal administrations. They want to have stable, long-term contracts of employment rather than limited-term contracts. In contrast, the groups I am currently working with are made up of people with no particular political loyalties. They become activists out of a desire to protect themselves, because they wish to avoid the dangers of individual isolation, they come from the "normal" urban middle classes, even if some of them are also somewhat older and took part in the 68 movement. As ever, their individual stories are very interesting and testify to the profound transformations currently afoot better than any theoretical discourse could do. Politics and the media are miles away from that. In particular it always strikes me and frustrates me to see how out of touch with reality the left is. Prodi's government, which has been in office since June, is the best example of this. This government has simply wiped out twenty years of reflection on the transformation of the world of work and post-Fordism. We really have regressed twenty years. If Berlusconi and Fini's right-wing supporters could exploit this situation to serve their own ends if they took more concerted action, but at present they do not seem to be capable of that. Who knows if perhaps a new phase of awakening of civil society might not emerge out of this profound crisis of politics, out of the mistrust towards both poles of the political spectrum and this second-generation of self-employed workers will most certainly be on board then.