



**Klaus Ronneberger**

## The art of not becoming accustomed to anything

*Precarious employment in flexible capitalism*

Interns, temporary agency workers, people on job creation schemes, and pseudo-freelancers make up the vast reserve army of workers in precarious employment. For the majority, standards such as productivity or flexibility have become second nature. In this respect, they are the avant-garde of post-Fordism, constantly opening up new avenues of self-exploitation.

The strikes and mass demonstrations in France in spring 2006 against the planned relaxation of measures on protection against dismissal briefly seemed to suggest a parallel with May '68. However, in contrast to the mood of cultural revolution and a new beginning that prevailed in those days, the idea this time was not to create a new society, but rather to preserve the existing social system with its guarantees and protective mechanisms. The social partnership between capital and labour practised for decades in Germany or Austria has also grown fragile as neo-liberalism has become more firmly entrenched. The model of standard wage labour and the associated social security systems is crumbling. Public perceptions equate this development with a loss of power by the social state.

### **The fragmented labour society**

The extension of social security systems gave rise to a comprehensive system of state provision in the twentieth century; this was not a society of equals but a "society of similar individuals" (R. Castel). It continued to be rooted in class hierarchies, but on the basis of shared rights and resources. The interventionist social state therefore did not signify distributive justice but rights in terms of social protection. As Fordism became definitively established, normal wage labour relations became so broadly generalised that the majority of those in work could participate in the expansion of consumption and the extension of public services. A "respectable" social position grew out of stigmatised proletarian existence with its wretched living conditions. As social security systems continued to expand, they ultimately also incorporated groups not in a direct wage labour relationship. The social state became the welfare state. In the 1970s the Fordist growth model found itself in a twofold crisis. On the one hand, the Taylorist mode of production began to reach the limits of its profitability, on the other hand, the range of instruments deployed by national state social welfare systems failed in the light of growing economic internationalisation. Many governments in the West began to drift towards neo-liberal concepts and adopted a new course: rolling back state interventions and subsidies and fostering competition, tax cuts, and lower social expenditure.

However, the altered everyday practices of individuals made a significant contribution to shaking up the social model in force at the time. The growing consumer orientation of the masses undermined the work ethic that was called for, while the hedonism spreading amongst young people went against the grain of the rigid discipline then predominating in schools, factories, and homes. A series of social movements came into being, attacking authoritarian and hierarchical structures and calling for "autonomy" and self-realisation. However, the intensity of the combats and the unleashing of "autonomous subjectivity" did not lead to the destruction of capitalist modes of production; on the contrary, capitalism managed to take on a new lease of life.

The neo-liberal project picked up on criticism of the authoritarian social state, whilst at the same time turning against the subjects. The new technologies of power aim to individualise social risks and to diminish previous protection. Neo-liberalism responds to efforts to attain greater autonomy and the quest for individual scope to design one's own destiny by demanding that individuals "activate" themselves. Rather than the state providing protection against poverty, unemployment, and illness, citizens are now supposed to make their own independent arrangements. This gives rise to a new mode of domination and production, rooted in an institutionalisation of insecurity — in contrast to Fordist regulation of the social sphere. At the heart of this lies the reinforcement of market-style steering mechanisms in both public institutions and companies. At company level, production concepts and human resources policy focus increasingly on the short-term profit expectations of institutional investors on financial markets. In order to satisfy these high profitability demands, management sets store above all by flexibility: externally by shifting whole business units outside the company ("outsourcing", "offshoring"), internally by developing so-called Business Units (management via profit margins, internal accounting prices, etc.). Market forces increasingly take the place of direct surveillance and personal hegemony as steering and control mechanisms. In this manner, the power of work previously concentrated in companies was systematically disassembled. Whilst flexible production concepts initially gave rise to a split between "core" and "periphery" — in other words between the core staff and simple workers (spread of agency work, increase in limited duration contracts) — since the 1990s, the former "cores" have been growing more "fluid". These rationalisation measures boil down to labour being entirely exposed to market risks. As a matter of fact, atypical and precarious activities are increasingly spreading in all sectors and professional groups. Around 13 million dependent employees currently find themselves in insecure employment relationships in Germany.<sup>1</sup>

According to French sociologist Robert Castel,<sup>2</sup> the post-Fordist labour society is divided into several segments. Alongside the "integration zone" with protected standard working relationships, there is an "unlinked zone", comprising all those individuals who are, broadly speaking, excluded from mainstream gainful employment. Between the two, one finds a "zone of uncertainty", in which eternal interns, assistants on limited duration contracts, temporary agency workers, people on job creation schemes being paid a symbolic one or two Euros, and pseudo-freelances make up the vast reserve army of workers in precarious employment situations.

German Labour sociologist Klaus Dörre has examined the phenomenon of precarity in detail.<sup>3</sup> For him, workers in precarious employment situations find themselves in a strange "floating situation": on the one hand, in keeping with the guiding neo-liberal principle of "taking responsibility for oneself", they are meant to accept any poorly paid jobs, yet on the other hand are urged to invest

as much time and money as possible in acquiring further training to avert the threat of poverty. However, a flexible approach to seizing any opportunity and planned investment are mutually exclusive. How are people supposed to pursue long-term goals if they constantly have to re-organise their lives and re-orient themselves?

According to Dörre, the existence of workers in precarious employment also creates a "zone of vulnerability". In contrast to the long-term unemployed, people in precarious employment work in the immediate vicinity of the core staff. The "integrated" always see, before their very eyes, the reality of the world of work as experienced by temporary agency workers or the self-employed, which at the same time means they are also constantly confronted with their own potential substitutability. A secure full-time job thus becomes a threatened privilege.

Does the extension of the "precarious zone" also mean that the middle classes have been downgraded? So far it is above all working class milieus that have been affected by flexible production concepts and the associated deindustrialisation. Whilst Fordism brought about a "de-proletarianisation" of unskilled and trained workers, these groups now have a lower social status. The hallmark of remaining jobs in industry and new jobs in the service sector is a high degree of precarity ("working poor"); correspondingly around three-quarters of the poor in Germany come from these social groups. The discourse on the demarginalisation of poverty is therefore misleading. Although the "zone of insecurity" is also spreading to the middle classes, it is still primarily migrant and working-class households that are most affected by precarity.<sup>4</sup>

## Freelances

The deregulation of work has also generated a new species: "autonomous workers". This is a heterogeneous group, spanning HGV drivers in freight companies, who in formal terms are self-employed, franchise entrepreneurs in the snack bar business, and computer experts working on service contracts. A trend emerges in all of these employment relationships of dispensing with the wage character of work and transferring the social risks to the "new self-employed".

"Freelances" can essentially be divided into two groups. On the one hand we find the self-employed in the IT or communications sector, who enjoy high incomes and considerable job satisfaction. On the whole this group has few concerns about the sustainable assurance of their reproduction. On the other hand, one finds low-income self-employed and freelances, who have scarcely no savings due to their low incomes and discontinuous employment careers. In Germany this group, which also encompasses what are known as "Ich-AGs" (one-man or one-woman start-ups), now comprises over 4.5 million people.

Based on many years of study, sociologist Sergio Bologna has drawn up a differentiated picture of these "autonomous workers": freelances are responsible for organising their own work processes, which means that their activities are more diverse, including work in their field of expertise, accounting, and PR. Self-management brings a whole host of consequences in its wake: first of all greater control of one's own work, which means having increased individual responsibility even within structures that in formal terms are determined by others; secondly, increased economic utilisation of oneself, which means strategic marketing of one's own human capabilities; thirdly,

self-rationalisation, which signifies turning how one runs one's life into something like a company, making work and leisure virtually indistinguishable.

The self-employed must organise and nurture their relations with the outside world autonomously. Although this "relational work" is a central component of their activities, it is not only invisible to the client but is also unpaid. In order to secure one's own reproduction, one must constantly stay in touch with others to find out about contracts and jobs and be recommended to other employers. That is why freelancers always also view acquaintances and friends from the point of view of networking; relationships based on friendship and instrumental interests merge one with the other. As future contracts are incalculable, the self-employed are forced to keep several options open. That means mobilising skills, contacts, and energy without being sure if these "investments" will ever actually pay off. Freelancers' working hours are not regulated, as their remuneration is not measured in terms of an elementary unit of time but solely in terms of the outcome. As a consequence, the working day is rendered more labour-intensive.

Groups or individuals affected by permanent insecurity are required to show habitual mobility, a readiness to adapt to new instructions and rules. Post-operaist theoretician Paolo Virno<sup>5</sup> has described this art of manoeuvring as "opportunism" without equating this with a moral judgement. In his view someone is opportunistic if they find themselves confronted with a multitude of constantly changing opportunities and are prepared for the majority of these possibilities in order to be able to rapidly seize the next opportunity that comes along. At the same time, work done by the self-employed is carried out within a dense network of hierarchical relations, and a relationship of personal dependency on the clients or customers can be identified. To that extent "autonomous work" also assumes "traits of servility".

### **Creative workers in precarious situations**

Adrienne Goehler, former Berlin Senator for Cultural Affairs, has noted that the majority of the population is not yet prepared for the disappearance of conventional normal wage work.<sup>6</sup> In contrast, as she explains, most artists are accustomed to precarious employment relations, and indeed form the "avant-garde" of a development soon to be reflected in lifestyles and modes of work throughout society. Working as a freelance and other forms of flexible and precarious employment (such as internships) have become the general rule in the cultural sphere, in no small part due to the public sector's restrictive budget-slashing policy. A few figures from Germany by way of illustration: in the 1980s over 80 per cent of musicians had permanent jobs, but within twenty years this proportion had dropped to 54 per cent. The number of actors with full-time jobs dropped from 76 per cent to 58 per cent during the same period. Parallel to this, the total number of those working in the cultural sphere increased by over thirty per cent. Self-employed workers in the cultural sphere constitute the most important factor driving this dynamic. This group grew four times more rapidly than the aggregate figures for self-employed individuals as a proportion of the workforce.<sup>7</sup>

Figures provided by the Künstlersozialkasse [Artists' Insurance Scheme] reveal that in 2003 the average annual revenue of male insurees was 12 489 euro, whilst for women insured in the scheme it was only 9 359 euro. Most poverty researchers consider that an individual enters the precarity zone if their income is 60 per cent of average income. In 2003, this threshold was 983 euro a month

in Germany. A topical study by the Deutscher Kulturrat (German Council for Culture) also indicates that almost two-thirds of the 318 000 self-employed individuals in the culture business, in other words around 50 per cent of individuals working in that field, have an annual income of less than 17 000 euro. In order to survive as any artist, many in the cultural sphere are forced to work in a job that has no relation whatsoever to their profession.

In a sense, the cultural sector has become a testing ground for the "burn-out" of the commodity of working capacity. For the majority working in the cultural sector, standards such as productivity or flexibility — which they often condemn as capitalist disciplining — have become second nature. In this respect, they really are the avant-garde for post-Fordism, constantly opening up new avenues of self-exploitation. Values such as autonomy and self-realisation, along with feelings, experiences, creativity, which once were deployed to counter capitalist commoditisation, have now become significant raw material salvaged for economic ends. However, whilst management literature now lauds non-conformism as the key to professional success — almost as a glamour model for obedience to the imperatives of flexibilisation — the Berlin band Britta ask in the light of their increasingly precarious situation: "Is that bohemian or underclass?"

### After wage labour

In recent decades, the resources of collective solidarity in industrial societies, derived from shared experience of work under conditions of alienation, have been scattered to the four winds. Nonetheless, in the light of the current pressure for flexibilisation and deregulation, many critics of the neo-liberal project succumb to the temptation of longing for the "golden age" of Fordism. However, the social and economic foundations for that are now absent. Of course that does not mean abandoning the struggle for social standards and allowing the neo-liberals to dispose of the rubble of the welfare state. However, the unifying destabilisation of working and living conditions is faced with a multitude of social divisions and hierarchies. A worker in a precarious situation in the cultural sphere with a German passport is worlds away from an illegalised migrant. In addition, new forms of work have brought about such a change in daily life that freelancers in particular can no longer assert their demands for a better life using the conventional instruments of labour struggle. How can you organise people whose working life takes place in private dwellings? How could anyone organise a strike — against whom? The question of collective action against the presumptions of flexible capitalism now arises in a totally new way.

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<sup>1</sup> Karl Heinz Roth, *Der Zustand der Welt*, Hamburg 2005.

<sup>2</sup> Robert Castel, *Les métamorphoses de la question sociale, une chronique du salariat*, Paris: Gallimard 1999.

<sup>3</sup> Klaus Dörre, "Entsicherte Arbeitsgesellschaft. Politik der Entprekarisierung", in: *Widerspruch* 49/ 2005, 5–18.

<sup>4</sup> Olaf Groh-Samberg, "Die Aktualität der sozialen Frage", in: *WSI-Mitteilungen* 11/2005.

<sup>5</sup> Paolo Virno, *A Grammar of the Multitude: For an Analysis of Contemporary Forms of Life*, Nork York: Semiotext[e] 2005.

<sup>6</sup> Adrienne Goehler, *Verflüssigungen. Wege und Umwege vom Sozialstaat zur Kulturgesellschaft*, Frankfurt/New York 2006.

<sup>7</sup> Veronika Mirschel, "In der Sahelzone der Einkommen. Zur sozialen Lage von KünstlerInnen und freien Medienschaffenden", in: *Forum Wissenschaft*, 3/2005, 23–26.

Published 2007-01-26  
Original in German  
Translation by Helen Ferguson  
Contribution by Springerin  
First published in *Springerin* 3/2006  
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