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**Beyond the Term Self-employment:  
The Variation of Self-employment  
between Hybrid Entrepreneurs and  
Entrepreneurial Billionaires**

Dieter Bögenhold

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A decorative graphic at the bottom of the page consists of several overlapping, swirling lines in various shades of green, creating a sense of movement and depth.

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***Beyond the Term Self-employment: The Variation of Self-employment between Hybrid Entrepreneurs and Entrepreneurial Billionaires***

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Institut für Soziologie, Alpen-Adria-Universität Klagenfurt  
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## Abstract

Conventional discourses about self-employment are unsatisfactory since there is no clear acknowledgment of its heterogeneity. Interpretations tend to refer to an average type that does not exist in practice, and there are problems of coherence, demarcations, and overlap. Examining macro-level patterns of self-employment, a number of patterns emerge. First, self-employment includes both marginal and privileged positions, within individual countries and also in international comparisons. It can put people at risk of precariousness and poverty or it can be a vehicle to bring wealth to individuals and enterprises, contributing jobs and economic growth to society. Second, people increasingly switch between wage- or salary-dependent labor and self-employment and *hybrid* forms of employment, as forms of micro entrepreneurship are combined with dependent labor. Third, internationally, the ratio of women in solo self-employment is higher than that of men. Fourth, remarkable differences exist at the level of solo self-employment.

**Keywords:** Self-employment, solo-self-employment, labour markets, social mobility, digital economy, entrepreneurship

## 1. Introduction

Self-employment is becoming increasingly dominant in global labor markets, yet it remains undertheorized. Self-employment in the so-called “digital age” has different contours than in capitalist societies 50 or 100 years ago. In the past, the largest companies in the world were mostly involved in manufacturing. Today, the top five companies are Apple, Microsoft, Alphabet, Facebook, and Amazon; U.S.-based firms that operate globally and which are ultimately linked to the so-called “digital” age of capitalism. A further paradigm shift can be observed from managerial capitalism to entrepreneurial capitalism (Audretsch & Thurik, 2000) in which changes in the economy and society multiply the dynamics and push forward elements of creative innovation as well as the need and power to create permanent newness. In 1942, Schumpeter (1992, p. 81) who, as early as 1942, pointed out that in dealing with capitalism “we are dealing with an evolutionary process,” which is never stationary. In particular, capitalism in recent digital times has stimulated the perception that our societies have become entrepreneurial societies (Audretsch, 2007) in which individual actors and their talents matter more than in previous times. In this general philosophy, entrepreneurship often serves as a force to revitalize cities, regions, and entire economies (Audretsch, 2015).

As Schumpeter (1992) has shown, however, processes of renewal are always double-edged and include innovation and newness, as well as decay and decline. The term creative destruction (Bögenhold, 2018; Schumpeter, 1992) covers precisely this ambiguous interplay. Talking about the “entrepreneurial society” may also force us to keep this broader scenario in mind, which includes social and economic poles corresponding to “good” and “bad” jobs (Kalleberg, 2011).

Depending on their concrete individual perspective, observers are either on the side of creativity and entrepreneurial opportunities or on the side of social policy issues and problems of labor market flexibility. Consequently, the entrepreneurial society is also labelled—in a more negative conceptualization—as the “sharing economy,” the “gig economy,” and the “on-demand economy,” to quote the three most popular terms, indicating the new labor relationships being enabled by digital technology. Rather than engaging in career paths, these terms denote actors who are permanently moving from contract to contract or from “gig” to “gig,” always on standby for new demands, freelancers who are permanently at the direct disposal of customers asking for individual services (Burke, 2011; Burke & Cowling, 2015; Kitching & Smallbone, 2012). This vision has less to do with the ideal of successful superstar entrepreneurs and rather more with a growing set of self-employed actors who fail to obtain a proper working contract in salary or wage dependent employment, working instead as freelancers or other forms of small own-account workers (Hytti, 2005). It is an empirically open question as to which of the two stereotypes is closer to the truth and, perhaps, which potential overlaps exist between both.

This article deals with self-employment today, including the question as to why self-employment is on the academic agenda. Since empirically divergent paths and the logics of patterns of self-employment must be taken into account, in particular, the social and economic heterogeneity of the actors stands out and is worthy of discussion. In contrast to stereotypical assumptions, the phenomenon of self-employment may look entirely different when it is studied as a phenomenon embedded in labor markets and in specific occupational contexts, applications, and sectors. Some types of small business persons and independent professionals belong to a category that does not fit in with the clean image of entrepreneurship. Empirical studies on diverse groups of self-employed individuals in larger societal and labor market contexts may produce alternative pictures, challenging stereotypical assumptions and types of rhetoric related to self-employment and independent business (Blackburn & Kovalainen, 2008; Kautonen et al., 2010; Van Stel & de Vries, 2015).

## **2. Self-employment as Labour Market Category: The Rise and Fall of Waged Labour**

The 20th century saw the establishment of contractual labor in its modern form, in which wage- or salary-dependent work was characteristic for the great majority of people in the employment system in “more developed” countries. People were conceptualized and treated in law as formally free entities who could enter into contracts on the basis of existing labor laws, although this freedom was limited by the power of supply and demand on the labor market. In parallel with the rise in mass production, nearly all OECD (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development) countries experienced a secular decline in self-employment in the course of the 20th century. Much of this decline can be traced back to the decline in employment in agriculture due to the enormous increase in productivity achieved in the agricultural sector. Research on institutional factors (Staber & Bögenhold, 1993) has indicated a variety of components influencing the rates of self-employment. In particular, the relative ratios of unemployment remain in direct proportion to self-employment rates. Cross-national research for a series of different OECD countries has showed that an upsurge in unemployment was always responsible for an upswing in self-employment for a time span of several decades (Bögenhold & Staber, 1991).

Looking at self-employment cross-sectionally conceals the inter- and intragenerational social mobility behind the figures. The figures may remain the same, although multiple inflow and outflow dynamics are taking place. Sociological stratification and mobility research reveals the strong dynamics between wage-dependent work and unemployment on the one hand and self-employment on the other. In other words, self-employment as a category continuously receives fresh blood and loses old blood through “underground mobility.” Observing self-employment ratios hides inflow and outflow processes behind the statistical aggregates.

Behind the regular development of peaks and troughs of self-employment in labor market terms, secular trends have to be acknowledged, in particular toward a shrinking of employment in agriculture and deindustrialization of economies and societies, leading to the increase in importance of employment in the tertiary sector (Arum & Müller, 2004). The trend toward services has a number of facets. First, there are new occupations and job profiles; these are then, in turn, associated with the emergence of a multiplicity of new self-employed occupations and job profiles (Bögenhold & Fachinger, 2008). To reduce a complex phenomenon to a common denominator, those professional groups that Max Weber (1978) described as the “poor intelligentsia” with specialized knowledge are by now well on the way to becoming the majority of society. In as much as work that is not directly carried out in production of the economy, and especially in manufacturing, will expand further, it will become an important as well as difficult task to develop concepts that accurately articulate different forms of work.

According to OECD data on labor force statistics (OECD, 2015), between 75% and 85% of the total labor force is engaged in labor in the tertiary sector, a dramatic rise from the mid-20th century when 30% to 45% of the labor force was employed there. Thus, the vast majority of people in the employment system in the OECD are no longer engaged in manufacturing or primary production but are associated with some kind of postindustrial production (Bell, 1973). Of course, even the tertiary sector is very broad and Bell (1973) added quaternary (trade, finance, insurance, real estate) and quinary sectors (health, education, research, government, recreation) to highlight different segments of the so-called postindustrial society.

Taking a historical view over the past century, a decisive change is evident in the social landscape of human life. Alongside other historically significant developments, innovative information technologies are of special interest, constituting as they do a new technological paradigm. These innovations have reshaped and are still reshaping our society and everything that is interconnected with it (Jin, 2016; Mokyr, 2002). Besides many other important implications caused by this general overhaul, the changing structure of the labor market is of particular interest (Castells, 2010).

The digitalization of economic activities and the emergence of newly networked enterprise units has shortened the time per operation and accelerated the turnover of resources. Changing management techniques have increased the speed of financial transactions to milliseconds due to the availability of new information technology with which software can generate losses or gains thanks to quasi-instantaneous decisions (Jin, 2016). What truly matters for every social process and form is the actual interaction between modes of development and modes of production (the “living flesh of societies”) enacted by social actors in often unpredictable ways (McCloskey, 2010; Mokyr, 2002).

The shift to a tertiary, quaternary, and quinary economy went hand in hand with the transformation of the structure of occupations, education profiles, and the structure of firms. The fourth logistical revolution introduced new competitive factors including new communication networks, cognitive skills, creativity in scientific research and R&D, the complexity of goods/services, and new forms of education and work content (Andersson & Andersson, 2017; Madsbjerg, 2017). Interpreting new markets as a complex result of occupational changes at a macro level and social mobility within the biographies of individual agents gives an idea of how change serves as sources of newness. Deming (2017) illustrates a change in required job skills for the United States in the period from 1980 to 2012, in which the component of social and mathematical skills increased in varying proportions, but at a steady pace.

Debates relating to the level, quantity and quality of recent work profiles must also take into account the new phenomena that are appearing due to new technological possibilities in the digital economy, principally crowdwork and work on demand via apps. After a long historical period of decline in self-employment in Western societies, recent years have shown a stabilization and often even a rise in self-employment figures in many countries due to a variety of factors. Seemingly the long-term trend has come to an end and diverse factors can be identified pushing toward new forms of self-employment covering diverse careers and various forms of economic and social reality. Crowdwork has been made possible by new technological facilities, boosting self-employment numerically. Crowdwork is “executed through online platforms that put in contact an indefinite number of organizations, businesses and individuals through the internet, potentially allowing connecting clients and workers on a global basis” while “work-on-demand” via apps refers to “jobs related to traditional working activities such as transport, cleaning and running errands, but also forms of clerical work, [which] are offered and assigned through mobile apps” (De Stefano, 2015). Of course, the last group is not homogeneous, the most relevant distinctions being drawn between apps that match demand and supply of different activities such as cleaning, running errands, and home repairs and other apps that offer more specialized services such as driving or even some forms of clerical work such as legal services or consultancy (Aloisi, 2015; De Stefano, 2015).

These sectoral shifts in the economy in combination with new technological facilities have increased opportunities for freelancers, micro-firms, and other forms of small businesses. Overall, the majority of the self-employed are working as a one-man or one-woman firm, which raises the need to challenge established views on self-employment and entrepreneurship. Too often the generally changing contours of work are overlooked (Sweet & Meiksins, 2017). Within the group of the self-employed, there is great heterogeneity and increasingly blurred boundaries between dependent work and self-employment must be acknowledged. The variety of different forms of work behavior and social security is growing

due to different economic and social status groups (European Commission, 2018). Especially, trends toward deindustrialization in Western countries and simultaneous tendencies toward globalization are coinciding with new phenomena under the banner of digitalization. In fact, digitalization raises new questions about the interaction of self-employment, economic change, and the conditions of occupational and social structures. The so-called new “gig economy” (Morgan & Nelligan, 2018; Prassl, 2018) is exactly about those interactions in new times in the world of work. Talking about self-employment implies acknowledging a broader framework of factors influencing the configuration of employment categories and economic processes as well as social and labor market realities (Bøgenhold, Fink, & Kraus, 2014).

### **3. Diverse Forms and Contexts of Self-employment**

New technological processes that introduce new elements of creativity into the economy and society also simultaneously bring of destandardization and insecurity. For example, Bøgenhold and Fachinger (2016) consider four interrelated trends when observing recent self-employment patterns: (1) an increase in micro self-employment, (2) rising rates of social destandardization and mobility, (3) evolving blurred boundaries between self-employed and wage- and salary-dependent work including diverse forms of hybridity, and (4) clearly visible employment patterns of precarization. The category of self-employment includes very privileged positions—the entrepreneurial billionaires—as well as very marginal ones, coexisting in the same category at the same time. On one hand, empirical phenomena can be found indicating the risk of precariousness and poverty (Kalleberg, 2009), and on the other, occupational self-employment is a vehicle to bring individual people property and wealth and that is regarded as a policy instrument for the creation of further enterprises, jobs, and economic growth.

In considering patterns of self-employment, one must consider convergent as well as divergent developments within individual countries and in an international comparison. The OECD’s Labour Force Statistics (2015) reveal how greatly the level of self-employment varies internationally. In order to understand remarkable differences between countries, it is necessary to ask about their specific institutional settings. The division of labor must be acknowledged as diverse in different countries: borders between self-employment and dependent work can be more rigid or fluid, degrees of informality differ, and processes of social mobility have their own rules. Social processes between the categories of self-employment and wage- or salary-dependent work occur permanently in both directions, the level of statistical accurateness and informality differs, and the grey zone between entrepreneurship and dependent work is vast. Different “worlds of work” (Tilly & Tilly, 1994) exist that have to be analyzed and compared systematically.

#### 4. Problems of Statistical Classifications and Heterogeneity

The heterogeneity of the category of self-employment makes discussing patterns of self-employment challenging. What's more, although waged work and self-employment are often regarded as being dichotomous, they share a common area. For example, the borderline between self-employment and dependent labor is blurred as could be shown empirically for different types of workers (Bögenhold, Heinonen, & Akola, 2014) since (1) the demarcation line is not very clear; (2) agents are always moving back and forth, depending on individual job opportunities; and (3) mixed identities or multiple jobs mostly do not exist within statistical categories (see Bögenhold & Fachinger, 2013).

##### 4.1. *Own account workers*

Despite these fluxes of social and occupational mobility of inflow and outflow, most public statistics still classify the world of labor in just two categories. For example, the International Labor Organization (1993) standard definition has the group of employers and the group of own-account workers. The latter is defined as following:

“Own-account workers are those workers who, working on their own account or with one or more partners, hold the type of job defined as a 'self-employment job' ..., and have not engaged on a continuous basis any 'employees' .... to work for them during the reference period. It should be noted that during the reference period the members of this group may have engaged 'employees', provided that this is on a non-continuous basis” (ILO, 1993).

In contrast to this, dependent workers are described thus:

“Paid employment jobs are those jobs where the incumbents hold explicit (written or oral) or implicit employment contracts, which give them a basic remuneration, which is not directly dependent upon the revenue of the unit for which they work (this unit can be a corporation, a non-profit institution, a government unit or a household). Some or all of the tools, capital equipment, information systems and/or premises used by the incumbents may be owned by others, and the incumbents may work under direct supervision of, or according to strict guidelines set by the owner(s) or persons in the owners' employment. (Persons in 'paid employment jobs' are typically remunerated by wages and salaries, but may be paid by commission from sales, by piece-rates, bonuses or in-kind payments such as food, housing or training).” (ILO, 1993).

According to this definition—and many others as well—actors fall under several different categorical definitions at the same time, because they are thought of in binary terms of *either-or*. However, dependent workers and independent actors sometimes have overlapping identities meaning that some authors have called them hybrid entrepreneurs (Bögenhold & Klinglmair, 2016; Folta, Delmar, & Wennberg, 2010; Schulz, Urbig, & Procher, 2016).

International comparative data for a series of different countries in the European Union show that more than half of all self-employed work in their own businesses with no further employee. At about 56%, Germany has a comparatively low level of one-person self-employed people, while it is much higher in the United Kingdom (85%). Controlling for gender, female self-employment is marginally higher in solo self-employment than for males (Bögenhold & Klinglmair, 2015). A great number of freelancers and owners of micro-firms belong in this group (Friedman, 2014). Empirical studies on self-employed individuals challenge many stereotypical assumptions and types of rhetoric related to self-employment and independent business (cf Blackburn & Kovalainen, 2008; Bögenhold & Klinglmair, 2016; Burke & Cowling, 2015; Cieslik 2017; Kautonen et al., 2010; Van Stel & de Vries, 2015).

Even in the above-mentioned segments of the tertiary, quaternary, and quinary sectors, the organization of work activity varies considerably. In the offices and practices of many professionals, such as legal advisors, tax consultants, and doctors, for example, a proportion of self-employed persons can manage without staff. Thus, if we scrutinize the structure of self-employment more carefully within individual economic segments, a particularly large quota of people can be found not only working alone in parts of the retail trade, traditionally in commercial representation, but also in the fields of adult education and entertainment (e.g., artists, journalists, film and radio producers), as well as in publishing, brokerage and insurance, where some two thirds of all self-employed actors operate “solo.” But even in expanding services such as data processing, software development, advertising, and other business-oriented services between 60% and 80% of the self-employed work alone. This includes the world of freelancers (Shevchuk & Strebkov, 2015, 2017), who have a huge common denominator with solo self-employment.

Increasing self-employment rates and business start-ups are always due to different factors. The literature distinguishes between two opposing ideal poles, which are a rationality of pushing versus pulling factors. In short, are people motivated by poverty or missing alternatives in the labor market to earn a living on the one hand or are they primarily driven by the intrinsic motivation of self-realization by working on their own? The *Global Entrepreneurship Monitor* (2016-2017; Reynolds, 2017) labeled those different entry rationalities “necessity driven” versus “opportunity driven” rationality.

In their regression analyses of various OECD countries over a period from the early 1950s to the late 1980s, in a series of pieces, Bögenhold and Staber (1991, 1993) found that unemployment must consistently be regarded as a positively stimulative element in the self-employment figures. Across the period and looking at the average of the different countries, it can be stated that whenever unemployment rates go up, self-employment rates also increase, strong evidence for a firm positive correlation. When the push of a lack of alternatives provides for new people in self-employment, the increase in the number of self-employed is not the prelude to substantial growth in jobs but is—at least prima facie—the

very opposite, that is, the expression of a deficit on the labor market. To put it more colorfully, what is being lauded in propaganda terms as the *medicine* to cure high unemployment is much more appropriately to be seen as the thermometer that indicates how acute the sickness of unemployment really is.

One can conclude that entries to self-employment always reflect changing compositions between necessity and the motivation of self-realization, as summarized in Table 1 below. A narrow and more realistic view shows that diverse agents exist under the flag of self-employment, the push or pull mechanics indicating that motivations, paths, and conditions vary a lot. Some types of small businessmen and women and independent professionals belong to a category that does not fit in with classic images (Burke & Cowling, 2015). They do not show ambition for growth, and they operate in routines that are sometimes very close to low-income ranges.

Desire for self-development				
Slight	Indifferent	High		
I	II	III	Poor	Labor market situation: employment alternatives in waged or salaried capacity
IV	V	VI	Indifferent	
VII	VIII	IX	Good	

Source. Bögenhold (2004).

**Figure 1 Different Socioeconomic Paths into Self-Employment**

The incomes of self-employed people show the full range from zones close to poverty up to the highest income levels in society. Fachinger (2016) shows the distribution of income for self-employment in full- and part-time work for Germany in 2011, indicating out that part-time jobs are usually at the lower levels of income, albeit with some range. However, income from full-time work in self-employment spans the full range of income levels. Of course, the higher the income, the smaller is the population share of those income holders. As such, it is evident that empirical studies on diverse groups of self-employed individuals in larger societal and labor market contexts produce alternative pictures, challenging stereotypical assumptions and rhetoric related to the textbook discussion on entrepreneurship.

#### 4.2. Heterogeneity within categories

Last but not least, looking at the categories of social stratification and labor market research, self-employment shows such a heterogeneity in different terms that divergences *within* the category are sometimes higher than divergences to other social employment groups (Center for Research on Self-Employment, 2017). It is not only the issue of income but segmentation also exists in relation to working time. A further interesting aspect is how

many sources of income contribute to a monthly or annual income of a person, including self-employment, wage- or salary-dependent work and welfare system payments. Differentiating for gender and moving from an individual to a household perspective further multiplies insights and theoretical conclusions (Ahl & Nelson, 2010; Bögenhold & Fachinger, 2017; Minniti, 2010), demonstrating that inner family logics are often responsible for decisions to engage in one or the other employment strategy.

## 5. Everyday Self-employment and its Meaning

Many other variables segment and differentiate self-employment. In addition to historical, religious, and regional factors, immigration and also ethnicity in combination with self-employment are valuable lenses to show specific forms of organization of labor linked to immigrant self-employment (Waldinger & Lichter, 2003). Especially race, gender, and related perspectives of inclusion into and exclusion from specific groups provide own realities of belonging and thinking about the American dream (Valdez, 2011, 2016). Current discussion on the emergence of immigrant business distinguishes between a niche model, a discrimination model, and a cultural model (Light & Gold, 2000). A higher level of formal education increases the probability of self-employment, especially if these skills were acquired in the host country, as this facilitates the access to the labor market. Also, the number of highly skilled immigrants is growing, since there are more possibilities to obtain a good education in their country of origin. As a result, a large pool of highly skilled and mobile migrant entrepreneurs has emerged representing a new generation of immigrants. Depending on the skills of migrants, there is a wide range of ways to start a business—human capital is the decisive resource. For example, migrant business start-ups in postindustrial high-skilled markets require a high level of human capital are knowledge-intensive and have a high growth potential.

Working in self-employment just as an own-account worker without any further employees, or working with the spouse as a family team, or being a manager or director of a bigger company can all make a difference to how somebody feels about the own doing, namely, in the perception of his- or herself and in the definition of the relation to others in the firm and in society. Hence, many self-employed operate their firms not as single responsible owners but as members of a team with shared rights and shared property (Ruef, 2010). Those teams can be operated in diverse different legal constructions and firm philosophies. Legal business owners can convert themselves intentionally or nonintentionally to paid managers who are formally wage- or salary-dependent in their own company, just in order to realize tax or other social security benefits. Of course, these circumstances hint to analytical problems of coherence when using a formal labor market category of being dependent or self-employed. The same is true for the unclear borderlines between dependent work and self-employment, which is very often oscillating and never precise (Leighton, 2015; McKeown, 2005).

Occupational positions in the scale of social stratification and in the system of the labor market may be analyzed in respect to material and social living conditions and, accordingly, related life-chances. Freelancers, farmers, or micro-entrepreneurs working full-time without employees, and “big” entrepreneurs employing a larger share of wage- or salary-dependent employees are difficult to summarize in one single box. Academics often tend to tidy the stratified world of occupations into models of common boxes, but not only blurred boundaries and other contradictions have to be acknowledged but also the worldviews of actors, which are often in contrast to the “box constructions” of academics. McKeown (2015) has shown in her study on freelancers and small businessmen that the actors are often not entirely certain about their own classification. Their self-definition oscillates between entrepreneur, self-employed person, consultant, and independent professional (I-pro).

Self-employment takes the form of being a social process within a life-course (Kohli, 2007; Mayer, 2009). Self-employment is sometimes just a biographical episode, with a specific structure of relevance and organization within the life-course (Schütz, 1962). Especially when considering the social world of family firms (Martinez & Aldrich, 2014), it is clear that those social and economic entities are very often realities *sui generis* with own logics of meaning and identity. Due to changing demographic patterns in most recent societies, the growing phenomenon can be observed that for different reasons older people are increasingly turning to self-employment (Kautonen, Kibler, & Minniti, 2017; Sappleton & Lourenço, 2015).

Occupations and their actors who hold those functions must be understood dynamic to understand the meaning provided to those activities. A protean career refers to a portfolio of occupations and occupational identities; new forms of careers focus on multiple personal motivations to construct one’s own career portfolio (Wyszominski & Chang, 2017, p. 5). In this way, especially in creative industries careers appear to be accidentally *and* intentionally always oscillating between different conditions and degrees of maturity. Research on the sources of meaning in life and work factors must acknowledge the *transitory* and *fluid* form of self-employment careers (Wiernik & Wille, 2018).

Contextualizing the object of the investigation (Welter, 2011) implies the acknowledgment that the change to the service sector in general and to digitalization in particular fosters the relative trend to smallest units of self-employment. The American dream (Valdez, 2016) identifies successful entrepreneurial careers as synonym of upward mobility and the principle possibility that people can achieve to get ahead. The issue, which makes the analytical task difficult, is that the majority of social and economic life is *between* the entrepreneurial billionaires on the one side and hybrid entrepreneurs who struggle with a puzzle of income activities to earn a living on the other side. The life and work situations of self-employed and liberal professions cannot be interpreted in simple black and white schemes, such as “close to poverty” and pushed by missing employment chances into the

sector of waged work on the one side, versus working without hierarchies and being independent and self-realized on the other side. Instead, many different socioeconomic situations can be found “in between,” which are driven by different social logics. However, looking at the margins of the economy contributes to challenging some stereotypes, which are often produced by undifferentiated discourse of entrepreneurship, more or less suggesting that only one average kind of firm and start-up exists. Instead, more than half of all self-employed people are working just as own-account workers without any further employee, and in some countries the ratio is considerably higher. It seems to be adequate to turn from research on entrepreneurship to research on self-employment, but even here one has to disaggregate and to find different patterns of occupational existences, different career patterns, and different biographical dynamics, which seem to be even more “tricky” in today’s digital times than they were 100 years ago.

This article has set out what self-employment looks like today and to examine related discourses. Conventional entrepreneurial literature is ill-equipped to put self-employment and entrepreneurship in the same box. A lesson for entrepreneurship research must be not to continue with very general wording about entrepreneurship and its resources such as finance or technology, but to link the discussion to the concrete determinants within contexts of culture, space, and time (Jack, & Anderson, 2002; Welter, 2011; Welter & Gartner, 2016; Zahra, 2007). According to Welter (2011), one can distinguish different elements of context such as (1) institutions including society, politics, and industrial relations; (2) business including firm sizes, industries, and markets; (3) space dimensions including countries, communities, and clusters; and (4) family including social networks and household relations. Those dimensions play significant own roles and contribute to the structuration processes of society (Giddens, 1984).

The significance of the historical (Wadhvani, 2016), temporal (Lippmann & Aldrich, 2016), institutional (Baumol, 1990), spatial, and social context in understanding economic behavior is widely acknowledged in research on self-employment (Welter & Gartner, 2016). Bruton, Zahra, and Cai (2018) argue for the case of self-employment in non-Western countries and they focus on the case of China, claiming that the role of the state and innovation differs in those countries from textbook knowledge as we know it in standard (Western) education of patterns of development and growth. The government is an integral part of the ecosystems that spawn and sustain self-employment, and the interplay of competition and cooperation works in different modes according to the overall political system of societies, and, hence, history, culture, and institutions intertwine to define the nature, scope, manifestation, and outcomes of self-employment.

## 6. Conclusion

Scholars may be systematically closing off from seeing a useful multiplicity of perspectives on entrepreneurship when just employing simple stereotypes of it. Entrepreneurship is not very precisely defined, as there are competing discourses, which prove to be contradictory on closer inspection. The phenomenon is more complex in reality than public discourse sometimes suggests. Consequently, entrepreneurship must be conceptualized not only by one meaning but instead recognizing several, some of which contradict each other. Entrepreneurship is an economic function, and entrepreneurship is also regarded as a tool of economic and regional policies. However, entrepreneurs are also a category of the occupational structure and the labor market. All this “entrepreneurialism” has been insufficiently defined, both by the public and by the academic entrepreneurship domain itself, and also within the history of economic thought.

It has been argued that entrepreneurship is a homogeneous domain, which is close to becoming a new academic subject. According to this, entrepreneurship was seen as gradually integrating itself and integrating other academic terrains toward a unique new field. However, not only has the nature of entrepreneurship changed during the historical process of the last century but also the academic handling of entrepreneurship in the history of economic thought has also changed and is inconsistent. Different approaches coexist and academic discussion on entrepreneurship is trying to develop typologies of different concepts. A brief glance at selected works of the classics already serves to show how disparate the contents of the meaning of entrepreneurship has been and still is (Bögenhold, 2004; Hébert & Link, 2009; Hisrich, Peters, & Sepherd, 2005; Kuratko, 2006). Different encyclopedias and handbooks of entrepreneurship show quite different compositions of contents (Acs & Audretsch, 2010; Shane, 2002; Westhead & Wright, 2002). Ultimately, one may conclude that the literature is full of definitions of entrepreneurship,

Which differ along a number of dimensions, i.e. whether entrepreneurship should be defined in terms of dispositions, behaviour, or outcomes; whether it belongs in the economic-commercial domain or can be exercised also in not-for-profit contexts; whether it belongs only in small and/or owner-managed firms or in any organizational context, and whether purpose, growth, risk, innovation or success are necessary criteria for something to qualify as entrepreneurship. (Davidsson, 2003, p. 316)

It is apparent that entrepreneurship as a socioeconomic issue or the entrepreneur as a human agent are much broader than merely a single universal process or an actor as ideal average human figure, too diverse are the individual, social, and economic rationalities, conditions, causes, effects, and contexts. One side of talk about entrepreneurship covers phenomena, which include dynamic fast-growing firms, which are at the core of hope of

economic policy debate. This practical field is closely related to further discussion about how to raise funds, especially through venture capital markets. Another, less spectacular form of entrepreneurship covers the emergence of new micro firms, of solo self-employment without intentions or possibilities for growth and of many diverse new developments in the field of small business (including so-called social entrepreneurship), which are more or less effects of labor market changes and which are often connected to low income levels rather than themselves being potential new multipliers toward new jobs or prosperity in society. Between those poles, a variety of further social and economic conditions can be found, which should be explored and spelled out to come up with an appropriate taxonomy.

Taking together this variety of topical interpretations, entrepreneurship emerges as a “hodgepodge” (Shane & Venkataraman, 2000, 217). Instead, we should “not restrict ourselves to a singular meaning of entrepreneurship, but should instead fully embrace heterogeneity and differences” and call for “diversity in entrepreneurship” (Welter, Baker, Audretsch, & Gartner, 2016, p. 7). The heterogeneity in social and economic conditions and meanings, of cultural settings, of ethnic and religious embeddedness, of forms of divergent local and historical contexts, of earnings and working times, and of social configurations as team- or family- or solo enterprises indicate a variety of divergent living situations, which go in hand with divergent life philosophies and inherent forms of meaning. Often self-employment is also only a part-time activity, which is run in combination with forms of waged work or it is a biographical passage, which serves as bridge between different forms of dependent labor jobs. Differences in conceptualizations between occupations, vocations and jobs are sometimes fluid, especially are increasingly moving toward a so-called gig-economy (OECD, 2017) in which people are increasingly seen as agents of protean careers moving up, down or forward, waiting for the next challenge.

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