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Sociology

The Sociology of Self-Employment: A Typology and Reconciliation

Sociology
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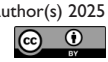

DOI: 10.1177/00380385251324563
journals.sagepub.com/home/soc


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Abstract

Self-employment accounts for a significant share of income-producing work but the 'sociology of self-employment' remains embryonic. This article argues that, to date, sociologists have viewed self-employment through discrete lenses, rooted in different intellectual traditions. A novel typology is developed that conceptually maps extant analyses, revealing the variety of ways these lenses portray the relationship of self-employment to capitalism. The identified lenses are: (1) self-employment as residual; (2) self-employment as dynamic; (3) self-employment as hyper-exploitation; (4) self-employment as mundane; and (5) self-employment as ideology. The article suggests that the empirical complexity of self-employment as a phenomenon underpins this multiplicity of sociological conceptualisations. Self-employment is both driver and residuum of capitalist development; self-employed labour both potential (or at least putative) capitalist enterprise and the absence of waged-labour. Reconciling the sociology of self-employment requires we recognise and embrace this complexity for what it tells us about the conditions of work in contemporary capitalism.

Keywords

capitalism, entrepreneurship, precarity, self-employment, sociology

Introduction

It is almost 40 years since Dale (1986) problematised the social class of the self-employed in the pages of this journal. Since then it has become a truism to note that self-employment remains 'undertheorised' in sociology (Bögenhold, 2019). This article explores that contention. It shows that the reason for the lack of a coherent approach is that self-employment has been conceptualised in diffuse, contradictory and partial ways in

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literatures that largely speak across one another. The article constructs a typology of the five main 'lenses' through which sociological conceptualisations have crystalised. These are: (1) self-employment as residual; (2) self-employment as dynamic; (3) self-employment as hyper-exploitation; (4) self-employment as mundane; and (5) self-employment as ideology. The article shows that these lenses involve different conceptualisations of the relationship of self-employment to capitalism and the social class of the self-employed. Concomitantly each lens draws on different empirical evidence and different type(s) of self-employed activity, containing different empirical blind spots.

The article suggests that understanding the specificity and variety of these lenses allows us to appreciate the complexity of self-employment as a phenomenon, but also how sociological understanding of that phenomenon is historically situated and contextual. In other words, self-employment is complex and changing, but that complexity makes it possible for understandings rooted in contemporary priorities and pressures to (re)frame self-employment in ways that reflect those priorities. The final section suggests that given the complexity and diversity of self-employed work, any reconciliation can only focus on what is constant, an immanent contradiction: the self-employed worker is, putatively at least, capitalist-in-becoming but self-employed work is also the negation of capitalist waged-labour (and those rights and obligations historically assigned to employees). This situates a sociology of self-employment as always about those boundaries – between waged-work and self-employed labour; between self-exploiting individuals and successful enterprises. And it means that any reconciled sociology of self-employment is both a lens through which to conceptualise millions of self-employed workers and analytic mirror through which to re-envisage waged-labour.

A Typology of Sociological Approaches to Self-Employment

Ensuing sections develop an original conceptual typology, identifying five lenses through which sociology has viewed self-employment. Sociological is used here to denote work by sociologists and work published in sociological outlets. It includes 'sociological' approaches from cognate disciplines including business, management, organisation and cultural studies.[1] What follows is rooted in more than two decades of research into self-employment but is not a systematic literature review. Not least because the field is skewed by massive investment by Business Schools in 'entrepreneurship' research. Rather it comprises a critical assessment of self-employment as a nascent sociological field (Hambrick and Chen, 2008). In consequence there will inevitably be nuances that are lost and important texts omitted.

Each sociological lens identified here emerged from and is rooted in specific intellectual and historical contexts (see Table 1). For instance, the first lens (self-employment as residual) dominated early–mid-20th-century sociology (Steinmetz and Wright, 1989), but was partly supplanted during the Thatcherite 1980s, which saw notable rises in UK self-employment (alongside small rises in the USA) by the second lens (self-employment as dynamism). These are, respectively, rooted in Marxist (or modernist) and liberal-economic logics. More recently, in the aftermath of the 2008 financial crisis, widespread

Table 1. Historical and intellectual roots of sociological self-employment lenses.

Sociological lens	Historical periodisation	Intellectual root
Residual	Dominant early–mid-20th century	Modernisation/Marxism
Dynamic	Coming to the fore in the 1980s	Liberal economics
Hyper-exploitation	Widespread post-2008, emerged 1980s	Precaritisation
Mundane	Concurrent with previous two, growing from the 1990s	Feminism/Migration studies
Ideology	From the early 2000s especially	Cultural studies

intellectual and policy engagement with 'precarity' (Millar, 2017), alongside the emergence of platform labour, the third lens (self-employment as hyper-exploitation) has assumed prominence. The fourth lens (self-employment as mundane) emerged simultaneously with the preceding three but owes an intellectual debt to feminist interest in everyday practice, including the interconnections between work and domestic life and, more recently, analyses of racial capitalism (Ekinsmyth, 2011; Martinez Dy et al., 2024). Finally, the fifth lens harkens to long-standing sociological interests in ideology, but particularly the growth of cultural approaches within critical management and organisation studies in the late 20th and early 21st centuries (Spicer and Alvesson, 2025). The content and context of each lens is expanded upon below.

Self-Employment as Residual

For most of the 20th century modernisation theories shaped the sociological view of self-employment. Through this lens self-employment appeared as the continuation of petit-bourgeois, pre-capitalist, organisation and therefore a 'residual' form of labour, identified with agriculture, small retailers or skilled craftspeople. Proto-typically self-employment was organised by male household-heads. Requiring long hours and (often) the exploitation of familial labour this form of economic activity was seemingly doomed by the development of large-scale capital (Marx and Engels, 1848). Simply put, the history of capitalism was seen to involve the substitution of self-employment by waged-labour, or to use Marxist terms the 'subsumption' of labour (Joyce, 2020; Marx, 1867). The conceptualisation of self-employment as part of an earlier labour configuration is explicit in American Marxist Erik Olin Wright's analysis of the class structure, which positions self-employed small business owners outside of the capitalist mode of production; part of 'simple commodity production' (Wright, 1978). It is also seen in use of the nomenclature 'petty-bourgeois' (e.g. Steinmetz and Wright, 1989).

The self-employment as residual lens is empirically substantiated by cross-country and historical data describing long-term declines in self-employment rates in almost every country and region. For instance, self-employment rates are universally lower at the turn of the 21st century, than a century earlier (OECD, n.d.). Additionally, cross-sectional comparisons show self-employment rates are higher in less industrialised countries, not just in the southern hemisphere, but also within Europe. For example, Greece and Italy retain high rates of self-employment, with lower rates in Nordic and

North-Western Europe. Gindling and Newhouse (2014) similarly evidence negative relationships between per capita gross national income (GNI) and self-employment rates, with own-account self-employment accounting for over half of all employment (and almost half of all non-agricultural work) in low-income countries, but less than a tenth of total employment in high-income countries (Gindling and Newhouse, 2014: 318). Employing a version of this lens, they thus argue that with economic development countries move away from both agricultural work *and* self-employment.

If the thesis that self-employment is residual provides a compelling explanation for longer-term patterns and cross-country variation it is unidirectional and concomitantly unable to explain variable rates of decline in self-employment, fluctuating rates of self-employment, nor less why self-employment rates have levelled off in some regions or occasionally risen (Giupponi and Xu, 2020). Indeed, a previous period of rising UK and US self-employment (the 1980s) was sufficiently unexpected to be framed as a conundrum, prompting a flurry of sociological 'explanations' (see Meager, 1992; Steinmetz and Wright, 1989). Similarly, persistent rural self-employment in the Global South has produced extensive reconsideration of how simple or petty commodity production may be reproduced within global circuits of capital (see Bernstein, 1986; Chevalier, 1983; Harriss-White, 2014).

In short, framing self-employment as a residual mode of employment is theoretically coherent, predicated on Marxist analysis of capital concentration. Additionally, the lens attends to broad historical trajectories and the intersection of self-employment with capitalism over the longue durée, placing contemporary self-employment within its pre-history, something other lenses too often omit. Yet, some self-employment is clearly compatible with and has even evolved out of recent capitalist developments, including as discussed below, new forms of platform work.

Self-Employment as Dynamic

In stark contrast to the previous lens that positions self-employment as pre-capitalist and typically ill-suited to compete with large capitalist enterprises – a sizeable social science literature, and larger popular literature, frames self-employment as central to capitalist socio-economic dynamism. Through this lens self-employment, usually reframed as 'entrepreneurialism', is seen to generate societal benefits, including social group mobility, individual advancement and regional growth. The figure of the entrepreneur (Schumpeter, 1911), a self-motivated individual whose endeavour proves transformative, is the focal point of the dynamic lens. Schumpeter claimed that 'entrepreneurialism' was typically located in newly formed small firms that drive development, generate capitalism's relentless dynamism and the 'competitive elimination' of older businesses. In the century since Schumpeter, entrepreneurialism studies continue to emphasise dynamism, but the classification of entrepreneurialism has evolved. Thus, today it is common for all self-employed workers, working alone or with others to be designated 'entrepreneurs', irrespective of firm-innovation or lack thereof (e.g. Martinez Dy et al., 2024). Similarly, and partly due to the complexities of measuring innovation, entrepreneurial 'success' is re-imagined as self-employed firm survival (Bögenhold, 2019), the (higher)

self-employment rates of particular socio-demographic groups (Woronkowicz and Noonan, 2019) or (higher) proprietorship rates in some regions (Coomes et al., 2013).

Politicians and policy-makers regularly adopt the self-employment as dynamic lens as the rationale for policies promoting self-employment (as discussed in Hughes, 2005: 148–149; Martinez Dy et al., 2024). In contrast sociologists rarely use a naive version. Not least because of evidence that much self-employment is poorly remunerated and produces little stability or innovation (Giupponi and Xu, 2020). Thus, within sociological spaces explicit statements that self-employment is necessarily positive, dynamic or even innovative are vanishingly rare. Nonetheless, assumptions from the self-employment as dynamism lens persist. For instance, in quantitative analyses of individual career outcomes that operationalise self-employment as achievement and 'low' self-employment rates (of women, ethnic or religious minorities, people with disabilities or specific age groups) as deficit. An early example is Glazer and Moynihan's (1970) assessment comparative analysis of US ethnic groups' entrepreneurial activity. The second way that sociologists reproduce assumptions from the self-employment as dynamic lens is by using the nomenclature of entrepreneurialism to describe self-employed activity: thus we see discussion of 'ethnic-entrepreneurship' (Zhou, 2004), 'migrant entrepreneurship' (Villares-Varela et al., 2022) 'oldpreneurship' (Mallett and Wapshott, 2015), 'encore entrepreneurship' (Crawford and Naar, 2016) and 'mumpreneurship' (Duberley and Carrigan, 2013; Ekinsmyth, 2011). In these instances, pre-fixes (old, mum, migrant, ethnic) point to identity and life-cycle contexts for moves into self-employment and analyses typically centre the constrained choices of those who become self-employed, yet the suffix (-preneurship) refigures activities *as* entrepreneurial so immanently dynamic. We might therefore say that where sociologists use this lens they deploy a nuanced version of self-employment as dynamic, one perhaps better termed self-employment as *constrained dynamism*, whereby self-employment is constructed as entrepreneurial, beneficial, even liberatory, but specifically for groups excluded from mainstream structures. In this context it is seen as a (partial) mitigation for collective labour-market disadvantage and social exclusion – a way to join the respectable middle classes. This ranges from 'inclusive entrepreneurship' programmes to mitigate disabled unemployment and underemployment (Pagán, 2009) through 'ethnic entrepreneurship' as mechanism for the 'economic advancement of numerous ethnic groups' otherwise suffering chronic labour market disadvantage (Bogan and Darity, 2008: 1999). The benefits of self-employment are sometimes argued to extend to wider (co-ethnic) communities, who benefit from improved employment, political leadership and influence (Bogan and Darity, 2008; Zhou, 2004). In a very different context but similarly deploying a constrained dynamism lens, women's involvement in micro-business ownership in the Global South, is often framed as 'liberating' or a mechanism for 'empowerment' (summarised in Ojediran and Anderson, 2020).

In short, while not embracing the entire self-employment as dynamic lens, sociologists borrow from its tropes. They use the language of 'entrepreneurship' (at least its suffix) and position self-employment as an achievement, albeit within individual careers. In both instances they implicitly reproduce an association of self-employment with dynamism and potentially also reinforce the dominant ideologies of self-employment discussed below in the 'Self-Employment as Ideology' section.

Self-Employment as Hyper-Exploitation

Where the previous lenses conceptualise the self-employed as petit-bourgeois remnants of pre-capitalist social relations, or dynamic capitalists-in-the-making, a third sociological lens conceives of self-employment as emanating from the darkest capitalist forces. The hyper-exploitation lens first emerged in the 1990s with the identification of 'disguised wage work' (Rainbird, 1991) but, in articulating the dependencies of supposedly independent self-employed workers, it reproduces themes from analyses of simple commodity production (Chevalier, 1983) . By the early 21st century, as new types of self-employed 'gig work' (Kessler, 2019) emerged, and the concept of precarity entered critical and political consciousness (Millar, 2017) the hyper-exploitation lens started to dominate sociological conceptualisations of self-employment.

Precarity, understood as weak labour-force attachment, few statutory protections and a resultant lack of social, economic and political stability (e.g. Alberti et al., 2018; Standing, 2011) was initially used to characterise types of casualised and/or temporary waged-employment but increasingly has encompassed self-employment (Conen and Schippers, 2019; Moore and Newsome, 2018). Where specified the characterisation of self-employment as precarious incorporates: (a) the voluntariness (or not) of workers' self-employment; (b) the absence of regulatory protection; and (c) income instability (Cruz et al., 2017). These exacerbate self-employed workers' dependence on customers or (larger) organisations (contractors, platforms, firms), making them vulnerable to new modes of exploitation (Conen and Schippers, 2019). As, however, Harvey et al. (2017) suggest in describing the 'neo-villeiny' of self-employed fitness instructors some 'new' modes of exploitation reprise pre-capitalist labour extraction mechanisms (see also Joyce, 2020; Stanford, 2017). Recently the self-employment as hyper-exploitation lens is primarily deployed to understand platform-dependent gig work. Platforms variously provide markets for self-employed labour (Uber; AmazonTurk), content (Twitch; YouTube) or products (Etsy; Ebay). Platform companies profit, not through the direct exploitation of labour-power, but through hosting transactions and, sometimes, exercising 'algorithmic control' over supposedly 'independent' self-employed workers, squeezing pay, allocating or restricting access to customers (Irani, 2015; Wood et al., 2019), albeit with significant variation in how this occurs (Wood and Lehdonvirta, 2021).

Within the hyper-exploitation lens self-employment critically negates or allows employers to circumvent labour laws designed to regulate direct employment, specifically protections on safety, pay, job security, training and benefits. Hyper-exploitative self-employment is typically industrially concentrated with sectors like construction heavily reliant on sub-contracting highly dependent but nominally self-employed workers (Behling and Harvey, 2015). The state may periodically crack down on especially blatant abuses. For instance, in the late 1990s the UK government redesigned tax regulation to better target 'disguised wage-work' in construction and hairdressing. More recently courts in the UK, Spain and elsewhere have found that Uber and delivery firms (e.g. Glovo; Deliveroo) mis-designated drivers/riders as self-employed (Bernal, 2021). In other cases, however, state regulation may create or exacerbate the vulnerabilities of self-employment (Choi, 2018). Thus, within the self-employment as hyper-exploitation lens, the state plays an important role, shaping the exploitability or protection offered to self-employed versus waged-workers.

The hyper-exploitation lens identifies contexts that make workers especially exploitable and so vulnerable to the (relatively poor) returns of self-employment, pointing to higher rates of self-employment in regions and historical junctures marked by weak labour markets or high unemployment (Diamond and Schaede, 2013; Ferrín, 2023; MacDonald, 1996) and to the use of self-employment as a 'side-hustle' for those lacking a safety-net (Ravenelle et al., 2021). The lens also attends to self-employment occurring in the interstices of the economy, encompassing practices excluded from the formal economy and performed by people forced to take on 'risky work' (MacDonald, 1996). This includes workers excluded because of their migration status, such as the 'precarious entrepreneurship' of undocumented self-employed 'day labourers' (Valdez et al., 2019; Valenzuela, 2001), revealing the endemic enforcement problems faced by undocumented self-employed workers working in unsafe conditions and frequently going unpaid (Chavdarova, 2014; Cross, 1997; Valdez et al., 2019). The lens also shows that enforcement issues are exacerbated where self-employed work is criminalised or stigmatised, as with self-employed sex workers (Sanders and Hardy, 2014). Thus, the lens points out that legal liminality and self-employment prove a toxic mix, exacerbating the exploitation of already vulnerable workers.

To summarise, the lens of self-employment as hyper-exploitation is primarily concerned with workers' vulnerabilities within capitalism and frames self-employed workers as lacking the (hard-won) protections accorded workers *as employees*. Consequently, even while some self-employed workers are nominally (or actually) independent, the hyper-exploitation lens sees them as always at risk of being preyed upon by capital. The lens tends to focus on novelty – ever-worse corporate actors constructing new mechanisms for extraction (including rent-seeking and monopolisation) via the platform economy, sub-contracting or other. Therefore, notwithstanding occasional hat-tips to continuities in extractive processes (Harvey et al., 2017; Joyce, 2020), it is less good at explaining longer-term change, nor why some workers choose to remain self-employed.

Self-Employment as Mundane

Where the first three sociological lenses examine the creation or destruction of the structural spaces for self-employment, pointing to opportunities (or pressures) to become self-employed, a growing literature explores the everyday or mundane experiences of self-employed work (Cohen et al., 2019), situating it within wider social contexts and inequalities. Analyses in this mould variously identify self-employment as a form of 'survival' (MacDonald, 1996), household-based economic activity and way to 'get by' (Jurik, 1998) or part of 'the hustle' whereby under-paid workers balance multiple part-time poorly paid waged and self-employed 'gigs' (Kessler, 2019). This positions self-employment, not as exceptionally heroic nor wholly marginal, but more mundanely as one among many types of economic provisioning activity; potentially an adjunct to waged-work or alternatively a 'biographical period' or 'social process within a life-course' (Bögenhold, 2019). Concomitantly it acknowledges that for workers in occupations like General Practice or plumbing self-employment may perhaps simply be a career stage. The lens also digs into variation in how self-employment occurs across occupations. For instance Woronkowicz and Noonan (2019) find that artists are more likely to

become self-employed in cities with high concentrations of other artists, something not true of entry into other professional self-employment, while Cohen (2019) shows that the temporal and spatial organisation of self-employment differs by occupation.

Shining a light on the concrete details of self-employment enables the self-employment as mundane lens to address socio-spatial inequalities among the self-employed, showing that experiences of self-employment reflect and reproduce extant intersectional labour market inequalities (Martinez Dy et al., 2024). For example, white university educated men tend to have the most profitable engagement with self-employment (Brynin et al., 2019; Martinez Dy et al., 2024). Conversely minoritised working-class women are less able to generate start-up capital from either formal institutions, such as banks; or social relations, such as the church, family or social networks (Harvey, 2005; Valdez, 2016); and consequently are concentrated in low-income, precarious and exploitative self-employed activities (Martinez Dy et al., 2024). This may be exacerbated by inequalities in property. Thus Reuschke (2016) finds that self-employment entry may depend on housing type and tenure, while much platform-based self-employment entails control over unequally distributed household assets (property; cars; space) (Adkins et al., 2020). As such this lens locates the coordination of self-employment within and alongside social, economic and familial relationships of unequal ownership and control, drawing our attention to ways self-employment reproduces and entrenches unequal power. That includes gendered inequalities in the capacity to deploy the familial labour of others or secure funding from social networks (Valdez, 2016) as well as the power exerted by family members (especially husbands) to constrain the volume or type of self-employed labour undertaken by others (Anthias and Mehta, 2003; Dhaliwal, 2007).

The lens also reveals gaps between individual motivations and experiences of self-employment. For instance, a key motivation for (especially women's) entry into self-employment is the spatio-temporal alignment of working-life with family-life (Berke, 2003; Carrigan and Duberley, 2013). The appeal of this presumed alignment is evidenced by growing numbers of mothers in self-employment (Jepps, 2020). Yet analysis of the everyday experiences of self-employment reveals long, unpredictable and disruptive schedules (Cohen, 2019; Forson, 2013; Jurik, 1998) and that self-employed homeworkers struggle to manage the collision of work and domestic times, spaces and social relations (Ekinsmyth, 2011; Hilbrecht and Lero, 2014). Similarly we see disjuncture between the promise of self-employed gig work as producing 'control over time' and workers' experience of devalued temporalities (Sharma, 2016).

In short, the lens of 'self-employment as mundane' situates self-employment as one, among many 'gigs' (Kessler, 2019), ways in which workers, located within households and communities deploy 'survival strategies', or exercise 'bricolage' (Villares-Varela et al., 2018) to produce a sustainable livelihood or 'make do' (Baker and Nelson, 2005). This lens does not attempt to account for changing rates of self-employment, nor its macro-context, but rather foregrounds the social context within which self-employment occurs, exposing the micro-processes that (re)produce and shape self-employed activity; emphasising occupationally specific labour processes and extra-economic, often gendered, motivations, facilitators and obstacles. Through this lens self-employment is neither necessarily dynamic nor exploitative but reflects the socio-economic inequalities that structure contemporary capitalism.

Self-Employment as Ideology

Whereas the first four lenses focus on the socio-economic context and experience of self-employment, the fifth takes a step back, identifying self-employment's cultural role – as ideology. Ideology is that 'part of culture, which is actively concerned with the establishment, and defence of patterns of belief and values . . . legitimization' (Ogbor, 2002: 610), specifically those that justify 'concrete vested interests' (Berger and Luckmann, 1991: 141). Berger and Luckmann (1991: 93) suggest that within any society, particular roles 'symbolically represent [the institutional] order in its totality' because they justify underlying societal myths and assumptions. The self-employment as ideology lens identifies the self-employed entrepreneur as one such role; a bulwark protecting and legitimating capitalist social relations in two distinct ways: heroic poster-boy for meritocracy and embodiment of neo-liberal individualism.

Starting with the first: the lens exposes the ways that the hard-working self-employed business owner is constructed as heroic figure, 'a special breed' (Collins and Moore, 1964: 244), with rags-to-riches stories relayed in news reports profiling business leaders and reality TV shows promising wealth to those with a winning idea and appropriate work ethic (epitomised by *Dragon's Den*/*Shark Tank*) (Anderson and Warren, 2011; Valdez, 2015). This tale of the successful self-employed businessman (usually a man, despite the rise of the #GIRLBOSS; Fradley, 2022) is foundational for the 'myth of meritocracy' (Littler, 2017), whereby success – and business ownership, as well as the non-ownership or poverty of others – are framed as rewards to individual merit. The lens thereby reveals the media's (and at times academia's) discursive fascination with heroic entrepreneurialism, perpetuates ethnocentric understandings of the 'rational' European-American male conquering a Darwinian world (Ogbor, 2002) and others female entrepreneurs (Rouse et al., 2013) even as feminised entrepreneurialism is celebrated (Duffy and Wissinger, 2017).

Second, the lens identifies how self-employment operates as the archetype and ideological facade for neo-liberal individualism (Fradley, 2022), discursively deployed in neo-liberal projects across diverse contexts, from Thatcherism's 'decade of enterprise' in the UK (Burrows, 2015) to 21st-century China's 'mass entrepreneurship and innovation' plan (You and Zhou, 2019: 178). This second form of legitimation has more diffuse and wide-ranging ideological uses than the former (the entrepreneur as distinctively heroic) since neo-liberal discourses of self-employment and entrepreneurialism emphasise universality: 'everyone can be an entrepreneur' (da Costa and Saraiva, 2012: 591). Indeed, as entrepreneurship comes to epitomise neo-liberal productive creativity we are all charged with developing an 'entrepreneurial self' (Bröckling, 2015) and entrepreneurialism becomes the archetype for an ever-expanding sphere of action (e.g. 'norm entrepreneur', 'social entrepreneur', 'educational entrepreneur').

The self-employment as ideology lens is historically sensitive, recognising that the ideological space occupied by self-employment varies historically and geographically. Thus, in mid-20th-century Britain being a small business owner was 'backwards' or passé and 'entrepreneur' a term of abuse associated with 'deception, manipulation, and authoritarianism' (Lewis and Llewellyn, 2004: 6). Although not addressed directly within this lens, we might also note that ideological framings of self-employment vary

geographically and by sector. For instance, agricultural self-employment in the Global South is typically discursively framed as backwardness while female self-employment financed via micro-finance initiatives is celebrated as advancing socio-economic development and gender-equity. The coexistence of these contradictory framings suggests therefore that the ideological work done by self-employment is contextual: dependent on the interests of those in power and intertwined with the frames (popular and academic) through which these are represented. The self-employment as ideology lens has, however, tended to focus on external or wider cultural views of self-employment with relatively little attention paid to how such ideologies impact self-employed workers' framing of their own work (Piazza and Putnam, 2024).

Self-Employment and Capitalism through the Five Lenses

Having fleshed out each of the five lenses separately, this section compares them, with key points of difference summarised in Table 2. First, within each lens the class designation assigned the self-employed varies: from membership in a declining petit-bourgeoisie, nascent capitalists, members of the working class (even underclass); part of a hard-working (aspirant) middle class; to a symbol of potential (upward) class mobility. These class designations are explicit in the first two lenses, but more implicit in the others, made visible by the comparators used. For example, by the hyper-exploitation lens comparing the self-employed unfavourably with securely employed employees; or the mundane lens exploring inequalities and coping strategies of the self-employed. Correspondingly, the different lenses typically focus on self-employment occurring in different sectors: subsistence activities based in long-standing sectors (e.g. family farms; corner shops); small innovative, niche or creative firms (potentially in high-tech sectors); a variety of dependent sub-contractual relationships (as found in construction, online platforms and stripping); small low-growth and often labour-intensive businesses (such as hairdresser, gardener and restaurant owner); and finally, individual 'celebrity' entrepreneurs, especially those who write books or appear on podcasts to discuss 'making it'.

The five lenses also present (or presume) different historical trajectories: in the residual lens this is most explicit, with declining self-employment a core part of the conceptualisation. In comparison the dynamic lens presumes no long-term historic pattern but understands self-employment as facilitated or retarded by specific conditions and seeks to identify regional, social or individual (personality) facilitators for self-employment. The hyper-exploitation lens is more explicit about context, associating self-employment with unemployment and regulatory gaps, including those produced by projects of deregulation and organised labour's decline. Similarly interested in capitalism's evolution, the ideology lens associates increased deployment of self-employment ideology with neoliberalism, privatisation, welfare cuts and reduced social mobility. Finally, the self-employment as mundane lens has no obvious historical trajectory but locating self-employment with different types of social and household reproduction strategy suggests, among other things, a relationship between self-employment and different (gendered and racialised) reproductive regimes.

The variety in historical trajectories reflects and clarifies differences in the conceptualised relationship between self-employment and capitalism. Whereas self-employment

Table 2. Self-employment through different sociological lenses.

Sociological lens	Class position	Activity type	Archetypal occupations	Historical trajectory	Relation to capitalism	Key dilemma
Residual	Petit-bourgeois	Subsistence activity	Farmer, shopkeeper	Slow decline over time	Pre-capitalist	How is self-employment supplanted by waged-labour?
Dynamic	Nascent capitalist	New growing business	High-tech, innovative	Growth where economic conditions supportive	Driving capitalist growth	How to support and encourage self-employment?
Hyper-exploitation	Working class (underclass)	Marginalised labour	Construction, stripper, platform gig-worker	Growth where wage-labour regulated and/or organised labour weak	Expression of capitalism's dark side	How to identify and mitigate negative consequences of self-employment?
Mundane	Middle class (lower)	Low-growth (labour-intensive)	Hairdresser, gardener, restaurateur	One among labour market options. No specific trajectory	Reproduces inequalities, may enable occupational or social reproduction	What are the lived experiences of self-employment, especially for excluded groups?
Ideology	Upwardly mobile class transition	Individual entrepreneurial stories	'Celebrity' entrepreneurs	Intertwined with neo-liberalism	Legitimation	What ideological work does self-employment do?

as residual frames self-employment as pre-capitalist; self-employment as dynamic sees self-employment as the engine of capitalism; self-employment as hyper-exploitation identifies self-employment with capitalism's darkest creative tendencies; self-employment as mundane positions self-employment as interwoven with often hidden forms of labour and reproduction that occur within capitalism; and self-employment as ideology understands self-employment as central to the legitimation of capitalism, especially neo-liberal capitalism.

As the final column suggests, these lenses also focus on different sociological dilemmas or problems: the residual lens asks about where or when self-employed labour is (inevitably) replaced by waged-labour – and consequently is also interested in instances where this does not occur. The dynamism lens focuses on the conditions under which self-employment is supported by the state, regional authorities or business groups, including how to encourage or identify potential self-employment entrants. The hyper-exploitation lens is concerned with the ways in which self-employment facilitates particular (poor) labour practices, for instance by circumventing regulatory constraints on employee-relations and how it hinders opportunities for resistance. The mundane lens tends to focus in on the lived experience of self-employment, especially for those in marginalised positions in the labour market (women; migrant workers), including how intra-household or broader social inequalities are intertwined with the reproduction of self-employment. Finally, the ideology lens is primarily interested in the ideological work done by self-employment in particular political or economic contexts.

Reconciling the Sociology of Self-Employment

This article has argued that there are five different conceptual lenses through which sociology has understood self-employment. This section discusses how we might reconcile or move beyond these lenses and develop a sociology of self-employment. To begin to imagine what that would contain, elements from extant understandings (as discussed above) are summarised and reframed in this section. If we start with macro-trends: self-employment has decreased globally, but has nowhere vanished, and continues to be concentrated in specific regions and sectors (e.g. taxi driving; farming; hairstyling). Moreover, self-employment has sometimes increased, generated new types of work or been central to novel organisational forms coordinated by large-scale capital (including online platforms). From an individual perspective, we know that self-employment is entered into for a range of reasons – economic, occupational but also rationales rooted in workers' wider social and domestic lives as well as exclusion from or to supplement other types of work. Finally, while a small minority of self-employed businesses (overwhelmingly those run by white middle-class men) are profitable and grow, for most the lived experience of self-employment falls well short of its idealised portrayal. Nonetheless the symbolic value of self-employment persists, providing legitimation for capitalism, a language for governments pushing neo-liberal individualism, but also (as discussed further below) meaning and motivation for those engaged in self-employed work (Cohen and Wolkowitz, 2018) .

This multiplicity speaks to a contradiction imminent within self-employment in capitalism. It is both potentially productive of capitalist enterprise, but more often experienced as a negation – the replacement of 'normal' capitalist employment (waged-labour).

As such, self-employment is a 'negative case', 'in which an outcome [large-scale enterprise and waged-labour] predicted by theory did not occur' (Emigh, 1997: 650). Understood this way, the sociology of self-employment is always also about *waged*-employment, providing a conceptual mirror and delineating the limits of waged-work. Indeed, both self-employment as residual and as hyper-exploitation explicitly position self-employment in tension with waged-work, the former in analysing long-term transitions from one to the other, the latter focusing on contemporary self-employment as lesser (at least less regulated) than waged-work. If we draw on these analyses to explore those sites – occupations; regions; contractual or technological spaces – where self-employment persists or grows and ask why the real subsumption of labour failed to occur (or, more rarely, has been reversed) questions about self-employment also become questions about the (non-)development of prerequisites for the domination of wage-labour.

Given that these sites are often sectorally located, with occupational change (and the decline or growth of high-self-employment sectors) accounting for a large proportion of self-employment change over time (Fairlie and Meyer, 2000) this requires we move away from analysis of self-employment (or entrepreneurialism) as an abstract set of activities. Instead by drilling down into work as concrete activity we can identify reasons why self-employment is occupationally concentrated. One element is that some work is labour-intensive and hard to concentrate. That includes work like hairdressing or care that is difficult to standardise or rationalise, and work such as delivery that is geographically dispersed with recurrent non-working periods (Moore and Newsome, 2018). Drawing on studies of peasant households (e.g. Friedmann, 1986) we might also explore differences between how waged and self-employed workers count working time across a day, week or year, including how self-employed workers discount individual or household labour-power in ways that waged-workers (and their employers) cannot. For instance, re-purposing (and not counting) 'slow periods' when they are available but not actively engaged in work-tasks (Sharma, 2016: 149) or informally smoothing labour demand peaks by engaging familial labour to 'help out'.

Of course, capital's (in)ability to spatio-temporally intensify work is not the only reason for concentrations of self-employment. Indeed, differences in the ways in which different state labour laws cheapen or constrain specific modes of extraction, whether by imposing regulatory protections or allowing tax loopholes, may be equally important (Stanford, 2017). And, as the hyper-exploitation lens identifies, self-employment is now integrated within novel capital–labour relations, involving new or reshaped mechanisms of extraction. Insofar as these persist, or grow, we are forced to re-consider where and how rent-seeking (as found in platform work) becomes an alternative or complement to labour process control over waged-workers as the preferred mechanism for capitalist profit-making. Notably, novel extraction mechanisms often occur within sectors with pre-existing high self-employment rates. Consequently, capital uses platforms to both reproduce and transform self-employment. For example, taxi driving has long been performed by self-employed workers but when rides are contracted via online platforms, rather than local minicab firms, mechanisms of coordination and extraction are concentrated. The novelty is that platforms enable such coordination and concentration without the transformation of labour or full subsumption of workers as employees (Joyce, 2020). Here, therefore, the innovation is not establishing workers as self-employed, but the

insertion of large-scale (monopoly) capital, more systematic extraction of rent and increased dependence of self-employed workers. Therefore, new organisational forms comprise a creative attempt by capital to concentrate extraction in and extract profit from sectors that large-scale capital had previously not dominated. Self-employment thus flourishes in the interstices of capitalism – in spaces capital finds difficult to enter – but, and in part because of this, it is renewed, and transformed, by the most dynamic and creative forms of capitalist extraction. In these forms self-employment is entwined in the dynamism of contemporary capitalism, albeit in ways quite unlike those highlighted by the self-employment as dynamism lens.

Finally, in thinking about its relation to waged-work, we must recognise how the ideological and discursive power of self-employment (Valdez, 2015) affects policy-makers, who champion self-employment as dynamic, but also workers, who gain symbolic capital from pursuing a form of employment with social and political currency. Thus self-employed social media influencers 'invoke the mythos of passionate work' with glamorised accounts of 'doing it all' (Duffy and Wissinger, 2017: 4661) and even workers undertaking exploitative or precarious work choose to identify as self-employed, framing it as a step towards 'freedom', 'independence', 'being my own boss' or 'flexibility' (Choi, 2018; Cruz et al., 2017; Dhaliwal, 2007; Jurik, 1998; Piazza and Putnam, 2024; Wood and Lehdonvirta, 2021; Wood et al., 2019). The resonance of self-employment as a collective identity, notwithstanding the poor conditions and pay of most and the hyper-exploitation of some, is not proof that self-employment confers huge rewards, nor that disadvantaged self-employed workers are ideological dupes. Rather, it reminds us that when they reflect on self-employment, workers do not do so in a vacuum – they are not measuring self-employment against an abstract scale of freedom or flexibility but rather self-employment is understood against the backdrop of waged-work (Piazza and Putnam, 2024). Self-employed workers are saying that they are not 'bossed' by someone else; 'not-an-employee'. Consequently, self-employment reanimates something that has become normalised after two centuries of capitalism; the daily degradations and harms of waged-labour. That self-employment ostensibly 'resolves' these harms reveals the extent to which self-employment both structurally legitimates a system in which working lives are chronically alienated and delimits the possibilities of alternative working lives. It also underscores why developing the sociology of self-employment is crucial to better understand work, including waged-work, in contemporary capitalism.

Conclusion

This article has mapped the sociology of self-employment and developed a novel typology, identifying five lenses through which sociologists conceptualise self-employment. It has shown that these lenses draw on different theoretical and policy agendas, focus on different types of work, categorise the self-employed as occupying different social class locations, conceptualise the historical trajectory of self-employment and relationship to capitalism differently and, consequently, are concerned with different sociological dilemmas. Given these differences we might ask whether self-employment is so diverse as to no longer be a useful analytic category. This article does not take this position. Self-employment remains sociologically important for (at least) three reasons. First, in the

context of global capitalism where waged-labour is the default, the emergence of self-employment in geographic, institutional or occupational spaces reveals the concrete limits to waged-work. In this way the sociology of self-employment becomes an indispensable analytic mirror to re-envisage waged-labour. Second, questions about the organisation of self-employment persist across academic fields and studies focused on self-employment in different occupational and historical locations. For instance literature on the platform economy reprises questions about control and dependency seen in literatures on putting out, simple commodity production and informal self-employment in the Global South (Chevalier, 1983; Cross, 1997; Joyce, 2020; Stanford, 2017; Wood and Lehdonvirta, 2021). Only by exploring self-employment as an, undoubtedly complex, phenomenon can we identify and make sense of such empirical and conceptual continuities. Finally, as discussed in the previous section, self-employment remains a socially meaningful category for self-employed workers across diverse realms of work (Piazza and Putnam, 2024; Wood and Lehdonvirta, 2021).

An alternative question is whether the lenses described here, concentrating on different occupational locations, might each represent a partial reality. If so, would combining lenses be the way to fully render contemporary self-employment? This is intuitively appealing, building on arguments that self-employment is a concrete phenomenon requiring analyses that chart its distinct forms and contexts (Cohen, 2019). The extant lenses are not, however, partial accounts. Rather they typically speak across one another, variously categorise self-employment *as* entrepreneurialism, *as* precarity or *as* residual, and are rooted in relatively incompatible intellectual traditions, meaning that there is no straightforward roadmap for combining all five. The previous section took a different approach to reconciliation, suggesting we must recognise the immanent contradiction in self-employment: that the self-employed worker is, putatively at least, capitalist-in-becoming but self-employed work is also the negation of capitalist waged-labour. This leads to an approach that centres the boundaries between waged and self-employed work and draws from different lenses to map and explain changes and continuities in self-employment as concrete occupationally, regionally and socially situated activity. It also means taking seriously the ways in which self-employed workers experience and are motivated by the contradictory nature of this work – which is simultaneously liberating and (often) exploitative. The attempt at reconciliation presented here is however a start- not end-point, intended to demonstrate empirical and theoretical benefits of a more developed sociology of self-employment.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Jo Littler and Gerbrand Tholen who read an earlier version and encouraged me that developing the article was worthwhile. I would also like to thank the anonymous reviewers and editor of *Sociology* for helpful comments.

Funding

The author received no financial support for the research, authorship and/or publication of this article.

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Note

1. The voluminous literatures on business growth and entrepreneurial personality (produced in economics and psychology, respectively) are omitted.

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Date submitted June 2024
Date accepted February 2025