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Everyday Crisis in the Empire

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Following the waves of euphoria and criticism surrounding the topic of the New Self-Employment during the "Roaring Nineties," the onset of the current economic crisis caused the discourse to slowly slip downhill into a mood of resigned depression.
The 1990s were an ambivalent time for artists: while opportunities to earn a living in the traditional art market were meager, a massive creativity hype was simultaneously overrunning the business world. This boom brought with it a host of new opportunities to make good in the exploding design and Internet fields. But it also rapidly established a freelance lifestyle as the general model for all those partaking in the working world of the "New Economy" – a way of life that had formerly distinguished artists from conventional employees. This model entailed self-employment and self-reliance, irregular working hours and hence income, a blurring of the boundaries between work and leisure time, the increasing encroachment of creative elements in a variety of jobs, and project-orientation.
It's true that the rise of what had to be considered – in comparison to what are typically viewed as normal working conditions à la Fordism – as an "atypical" work style was not a completely new

development. But the fact that this more flexible model was no longer reserved for women and migrants in the secondary services sector, but was increasingly spreading to the traditional business world dominated by the university-educated domestic male, turned this phenomenon into a pressing theme for a host of journalists and writers.

The new self-employment developed its most palpable dynamics in segments involved in creativity and communications, where participation in wide-ranging discourses on one's own identity and role are a loosely defined part of every job. This might explain why such a remarkable body of literature arose dealing with the new working conditions engendered by the New Economy.

The literature treating the phenomenon of the "new self-employed" can be divided into four categories, each of which came to a head at a different phase in the discourse. It all began with the euphoric ideologues, who were soon confronted with skeptics. These were in turn followed by those who gave the phenomenon a more carefully considered critical appraisal. For the time being we now find ourselves in a fourth phase, in which the literature of depression echoes the current economic downturn. But let's start back at the beginning.

Euphoric Ideology

In Germany in 1997 the "Commission for Future Questions of the Free States of Bavaria and Saxony" (**Kommission für Zukunftsfragen der Freistaaten Bayern und Sachs*en*), of which sociologist Ulrich Beck was a member, proclaimed its controversial vision for a solution to Germany's unemployment problems: the model of the typical employee should henceforward be expunged from the collective consciousness. Replacing this outdated model in the

future labor market was instead "each person as entrepreneur of his own working capacity and subsistence." Accompanied by euphoric rhetoric, this vision conjured up the image of a self-sufficient, self-reliant individual, to be born of the radical withdrawal of the state from shaping the social and regulatory framework for private business. With the new form of business proposed as part of the Hartz Commission's plan to reform the labor market, known as "Me, Inc." (*_Ich AG_*), this vision rapidly came close to becoming reality in Germany.
Similar sounds were coming in the 1990s from the homeland of the New Economy on the other side of the Atlantic. The climax of this euphoric moment was reached with Daniel Pink's *Free Agent Nation: How America's New Independent Workers Are Transforming the Way We Live* (2001). Pink paints a picture of a nation of freelancers whose flight from corporate servitude is connected with self-fulfillment, freedom and maximizing their income.

Skepticism

It's not exactly difficult to poke holes in this fantasy. Critical analyses of what everyday life as a freelancer is really like refute these optimistic reveries with hard empirical evidence, unmasking them as mere ideology. One look at present-day social conditions is usually enough to cause one to dismiss the promises made in the euphoric literature as so much hot air. The central studies on the topic that have been conducted in Austria come from the trade-union milieu: Eva Angerler / Claudia Kral-Bast *Typische Atypische* (1998), *Fiftitu% (A)typisch Frau – zwischen allen Stühlen* (2002), Gerhard Gstöttner-Hofer et al.: *Was ist morgen noch normal* (1997), Kurswechsel 2/2000 *Leitbild

Unternehmer*, and Emmerich Talos *Atypische Beschäftigung* (1999).
Their conclusions: most freelancers did not voluntarily seek that status; most are dependent on a few major contractors; their economic situation is more precarious than self-determined; the variety of activities in which they are forced to get involved (from their actual chosen work, to bookkeeping, to manual services) leads to constant overtaxing of time and capacities; working at home leads working hours to expand into endlessness, with the blurring of the boundaries between work and leisure time resulting in the colonization of every last bit of personal freedom by work and the nagging feeling that each minute must be devoted to something productive. The purported new freedom is to a large extent the result of corporate flexibility strategies, to which the individuals on the labor market are forced to submit.
Apart from these analyses of the actual economic situation, a body of literature has also emerged that takes a critical stance to the sociopolitical consequences of the new work landscape. These studies prophesy negative consequences for society and sociability resulting from the constant pressure caused by people's sense of insecurity and compulsion to always be on the lookout for new ways to turn their talents into cash.
In *The Corrosion of Character* (1998) Richard Sennett tells a sad tale of decline: the end of regular employment undermines values such as trust and community spirit. Work is no longer a source of identity; instead, people shift their search for a feeling of belonging onto local or national communities. Sennett sees nationalism as becoming an increasingly widespread reaction to economic insecurity.
Sergio Bologna also traces the growing local patriotism of the Lega Nord to the renaissance of the small businessman, the prevalence of which has replaced the former factories in North Italy in the

aftermath of the labor battles of the 1970s. Now that the new self-employed no longer have an official boss to fight against, the social and tax state becomes their nemesis (summary in *Kurswechsel* 2 / 2000).

Brian Holmes takes a different route to a similar conclusion, by contrasting Deleuze's "society of control" with Adorno / Horkheimer's analyses of the "authoritarian character." From this juxtaposition he derives a theory of the "flexible character," which in the days of post-Fordism has supplanted the typical Fordian authoritarian character (article posted on the *nettime* mailing list on January 5, 2002). This new character type is not alienated from his desires like the authoritarian personality, but rather from political society, a new form of social control. Paolo Virno has also examined this susceptibility to cynicism from a political point of view.

In *Le nouvel esprit du capitalisme* (2003) Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello mull through a huge quantity of management literature from the 1990s. There they find a remarkable number of echoes of the 1960s promise of freedom. The demands for autonomy, creativity and self-determination that the "artistic" critics belonging to the 1968 generation summoned in their attacks on the economic establishment reappear here with a pro-capitalist twist, appearing in the guise of new demands made by the corporation on its employees and contractors. New potentials and personality aspects that have long been out of reach to capitalism (since they had been localized in the leisure sphere) are now to be tapped and put to work in the service of economic ends. Exploitation now no longer takes place through hiring new employees, but by the ability to dominate networks. Now that the capitalists have adopted the demand for greater autonomy as their own, what's still needed, in the opinion of Boltanski und Chiapello, is a "social" critique to treat problems of distribution.

Critical Turns

But what can we conclude from all this? While many critics fault the flexibilization of working conditions, postulating the responsibility of state and capital for the economic security of the workforce, Nikolas Rose for one (in the journal *Kurswechsel* 2 / 2000), posits that the "entrepreneurial self" is to a great extent an inexorable contemporary trend. Rose believes that there is no way to turn back the clock, and that this new model must henceforward form the point of departure for all conceivable future political directions. With this diagnosis in mind, further analytical attempts were made to give the new situation a critical turn.
A modest venture in this direction is undertaken by Richard Florida, who turns the "rise of the creative class" with its need for freedom into a plea for sociopolitical liberalism in urban politics (*The Rise of the Creative Class*, 2002). The "creative ethic" requires an atmosphere of tolerance, cultural diversity and plentiful events. A permissive social policy and a certain amount of social security are therefore necessary to foster the settlement and continued well-being of this "creative class," which increasingly represents the main source of economic prosperity in Florida's estimation.
Whereas the needs of creative freelancers become an argument for social liberalism in the eyes of Florida, other authors go so far as to place their bets on Communism. Maurizio Lazzarato sees in "immaterial work" the main source of added value in a time when the production of meaning (via advertising, design and communication) is beginning to predominate over the production of material goods (*Umherschweifende Produzenten*, 1997). Those involved in this immaterial sort of production, whose work consists of molding society's opinions, moods and attitudes toward

life, are also necessarily involved in shaping political opinion. The boundaries between the economic and the political blur. Creativity becomes an attribute of the masses, leading to special challenges and problems involved in turning creativity into a good for mass consumption. The difficulty entailed by the "New Economy," namely that of putting a price on creativity and enforcing that price, becomes epidemic, transforming social conditions and calling for at least a general basic assured income.

Antonio Negri takes up this idea in his works written in collaboration with Michael Hardt. Immaterial work with its immanent properties - autonomy, creativity and self-organization in groups – is at root a realization of communist forms of socialization, which only appear on the surface to be under the command of capitalism. Although capitalism has succeeded in penetrating through to all areas of life, this was only accomplished at the price of assimilating into the very heart of its functioning the resistant, creative abilities of the "multitude," thereby empowering them to cast off their capitalist cloak.

The capitalist promise of new opportunities for self-fulfillment through new forms of work is not only taken at its word here, but also taken to its logical extreme, radicalized and turned against the conditions themselves.

In the year 2000, as the New Economy was reaching its peak and the capitalist push for globalization was encountering growing resistance from the masses, as manifest by demonstrations and protests at meetings of the elite, *Empire* came on the stage to provide a coherent context for a whole host of developments, combining these with a critical perspective: globalization of the economy and of elite politics, New Economy and new working conditions, migration and resistance, etc.

The fact that *Empire* provoked a furor primarily in the creative segments of the New Economy proletariat also has something to

do of course with the way in which the book does not localize hopes for a revolution in some far-off realm as in other analyses (such as among industrial workers, in the global South, etc.), but instead lays the responsibility squarely at the feet of the readers themselves. *Empire's* critics denounced this tactic as cajolery among elites (cf. MALMOE 11), while it was greeted enthusiastically everywhere by representatives of the creative class. These latter learned something important about themselves as they were conferred the status of the very embodiment of contemporaneity – not like the coolness- and shopping-obsessed avant-garde splashed across the pages of lifestyle magazines, but as active players in the process of social emancipation.
The aftermath of September 11, 2001 quickly took the wind out of the sails of the euphoria with which the book had initially been received, mainly as a result of two external developments. For one thing, the plausibility of a world political theory based on "Empire" faded quickly in the face of the abrupt about-turn of US foreign policy and intensifying competition among the major world players.
And then there was the precipitous burst of the New Economy bubble. Stock market nosedives and the general economic decline buried the hopes of sustained rapid expansion in the core fields of immaterial work and destroyed for the time being any prospects of a transformation of social conditions through new business modes.

Depression and Avowal

The long-lasting phase of prosperity in the "Roaring Nineties" (the title of two economic retrospectives on the decade, by Joseph Sitglitz and Alan Krueger / Robert Solow) was supplanted at the end of the decade by a similarly persistent crisis period. It's no

coincidence that at the beginning of the new millennium the pertinent literature is increasingly dominated by reports from the field in which any hope of transfiguration of social conditions gives way to an attitude slipping rapidly from cynicism to depression.
In *Les intellos précaires* (2001) Anne and Marine Rambach depict a generation that can no longer count on a traditional, stable career after graduating from university, but instead can look forward only to a future of pseudo self-employment – in journalism, in the cultural realm, in film and television, in research or in other creative fields. Their lives are characterized by an ever-widening gap between their erstwhile high social standing and their miserable living standards. After a time, all the neoliberal promises in the world appear capable of doing little against the hard, cold facts of everyday life. In interviews with those affected, the authors hear stories of depression, fear of the future and of failure, and feelings of humiliation as the constant companions with which these people share their daily lives.
The attention focused on a situation that had often been swept under the carpet in France before the appearance of this book was further reinforced by the most recent strike conducted by the "intermittents," the freelance cultural workers, who were facing cutbacks in unemployment assistance. The subsequent debate concerning the spread of pseudo self-employment and the precarious working conditions pervading the entire economy, especially in creative fields, brought forth a wave of autobiographical, confessional literature – books like Daniel Martinez' *Carnets d'un intérimaire* (2003), which tells of the daily humiliations undergone by trainees, and Abdel Mabrouki's *Génération précaire* (2003).
In their satirical but affectionate parodies of self-encounter workshops, presented in the art context, Annette Weisser and Ingo Vetter gathered together representatives of the new self-employed

to talk about their experiences and sound out new ways to take concerted action against unacceptable working conditions. The results, documented in a video and catalog (*NameGame*, 2003), reveal deep reflection, the universality of the problems encountered and a number of practical obstacles to forming political lobbies (lack of time, conflicts of interest, etc.).
In Graz, Vetter and Weisser met up with sociologist Elisabeth Katschnig-Fasch, who had just published the results of a research project that took a Bourdieu-like approach to examining the everyday suffering attributable to the flexibilized labor market (*Das ganz alltägliche Elend*, 2003). In an interview with Vetter / Weisser, Katschnig-Fasch says she was surprised to encounter very little difficulty in getting people to talk about their misery - despite the fact that disclosing this "dirty little secret" is one of today's biggest taboos. On the contrary, many were grateful to finally be able to get their concerns off their chest. The research group came to the conclusion that those living and working in these precarious times suffer from a loss of meaning and orientation in their lives and from a lack of recognition for their work, often reacting with feelings of guilt. A conspicuous gender-specific component to these problems was also brought to light.
In his book *Minusvisionen*, an anthology of interviews with the founders of failed start-ups, Ingo Niermann (2003) portrays the New Economy as a kind of dream-absorbing machine. The young entrepreneurs who tell their stories in Niermann's book, survivors of shipwrecked galleries, fast-food chains, fashion labels and online platforms, are presented largely as players who tried to take make the most for themselves out of the opportunities offered by the abundant venture capital lining the streets of the New Economy. They are viewed as businesspeople who never really took the business aspect seriously, or who were not up to dealing with it when it reared its ugly head.

Minusvisionen is the German variant of a mode of literature that has been booming in the USA in recent years – eyewitness accounts of people who got buried under the rubble of the dot.com boom. In *Netslaves 2.0* (2003) for example, Bill Lessard and Co. produced a follow-up to an extremely successful Internet and book project, which early on provided a platform for the articulation of widespread disgruntlement about the working conditions in companies participating in the Internet gold rush. The stories in the book make it only too obvious that, even in the dazzlingly profitable flagship sector of the New Economy - the Internet industry - behind-the-scenes working conditions are anything but glamorous.

In his discussion of Geert Lovink's look at the Net culture of the 1990s following the end of the dot.com boom (*Dark Fiber*, 2002), "Bifo" Franco Berardi, a theoretician from the Negri school of postoperational theory, tells of a class war between cognitive entrepreneurs and the great monopolies, which has now ended with a colonization of the Internet by the latter (cf. MALMOE 8). The dreams of the New Economy have run aground, the model of the completely free market has been shown to be nothing but a lie, in both practical and theoretical terms. Those among the new self-employed who have not yet been sucked up into the military-industrial complex are now out of work and disillusioned. Bifo therefore sees the proper conditions existing on the cultural level for inculcating a new social consciousness in the present-day "cognitariat." Now that all neoliberal illusions have been destroyed, the path has been cleared for a non-commercial process of autonomous self-organization of cognitive work, and the establishment of institutions that are independent of capital. Depression as point of departure for a new, emancipatory beginning? At the moment, there is little ground for such an optimistic outlook. But the ongoing crisis has at least served to

anchor a more sustainable sense of realism in the minds of those affected.
One sign of this reality-check is the fact that in the central organ of Austrian "people's capitalism" of all places, the monthly magazine *Gewinn*, a title story appeared in the first issue of 2004 on "Making money without being employed." *Gewinn* writes that the phenomenon of atypical working conditions "has by now made its way through all occupational groups," with "hundreds of thousands of workers now affected." But what follows is far from being yet another drum-beating advertisement for the new self-employment. Instead, the article traces the phenomenon of outsourcing to businesses' need to cut costs during the economic slump, and goes on to complain about complex and inscrutable labor legislation, pointing out all of the disadvantages of this working model, and giving a trade union member the floor to provide her own analysis of the situation -- all an obvious indication that the days of bloated euphoria and promises are apparently over, at least for now. The reality of the present crisis leaves little room even in the most notorious ideology factories for trying to put a bright face on things.

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