

On hybrid labour trajectories. A Conversation with Sergio Bologna¹

Andrea Bottalico, University of Naples

Andrea.bottalico@unina.it

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The transformations of labour and of the organisation of the working day have produced a strong anthropological change, with repercussions, including economic ones, on all actors involved. The debate in the social sciences, likewise, has been prolific. By looking at the erosion of the standard employment relationships, the academic debate has mainly focused on the new self-employed jobs as characterised by autonomy and self-regulation, flexible working conditions and risk-taking, overlooking for a long time the fact that these jobs may also result in precarious and vulnerable conditions, rising levels of insecurity, and lack of access to social protections. In the face of these transformations, the adequacy of collective forms of workers' representation has long been debated, not least because of the difficulties trade unions have had in defending workers.

These changes have not only been the subject of sociological analysis, indeed, in the recent years they have been addressed by different approaches and perspectives, inside and outside academia. One of the figures who most embodies this multiplicity of views and entanglements is undoubtedly Sergio Bologna, who through his first-hand experience an articulated analysis of the rise of the self-employed workforce, has offered a relevant contribution not only to the academic debate but also in terms of personal engagement. We therefore decided, as part of

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this Special Issue on the increasingly blurred boundaries between self-employment and salaried employment, to open a dialogue with him, with the aim to thoroughly appreciate both his theoretical and biographical journey.

Born in Trieste in 1937, Sergio Bologna has been defined as a militant, grassroots intellectual, positioned within the ‘real processes’ (Bologna, 2022). He had the intuition of the existence of what he defined as ‘second-generation of self-employed’ through his own direct experience between Fordism and post-Fordism. It is not easy to reconstruct his biographical and intellectual profile, just as it is difficult to provide a summary of all his countless writings and interventions. Any attempt to schematise his personal story and his theoretical contribution would be reductive and would not do justice to his ability to simultaneously hold together several transformations and dimensions of analysis. As he himself wrote (Bologna, 2019), there are three main fields of interest: contemporary history, logistics, and labour transformations, which are the focus of this interview. Contemporary history, with special attention to the labour movement, is the subject in which Sergio Bologna graduated and taught at university, but it is also part of his political experience. It is a history that, on the one hand, he has reconstructed through his studies and, on the other, he also experienced as an exponent of the radical and innovative Marxism of the so-called “Italian Workerism” (Bologna, 2014).

It is worth briefly recall his political background because it is precisely from those analytical assumptions that his contribution will draw its lifeblood in the years to come. In the months preceding the “Hot autumn” Sergio Bologna was in Turin in front of Fiat’s gates and took part in the activities of the student workers’ assembly (see “*Il lungo autunno. Le lotte operaie negli anni Settanta*”, 2019). In 1966 he had begun teaching at the faculty of Sociology in Trento, and after three years he moved to the University of Padua, at the faculty of Political Science, first as an assistant to Toni Negri and then as lecturer of the module “History of the workers’ movement”. Having abandoned militancy in extra-parliamentary groups, he then dedicated

himself to research and publishing, directing the Feltrinelli Marxist materials series and collaborating with various journals, such as “Quaderni piacentini”, directed by Grazia Cherchi and Piergiorgio Bellocchio, and “Sapere”, directed by Giulio Maccacaro. In 1973 he founded “Primo Maggio, essays and documents for a class history”, an important journal for many people involved in social and civil struggles (Bermani, 2010). The tension between theory and practice is indeed at the core of his contribution, as he himself describes:

“I had come from the 1960s, from the French May, from the struggles of the technicians, from the wild Fiat strikes, and I had no intention of pulling the reins in the boat. I wanted to create a research tool that contained, as a programme, the values expressed by those mass movements. I did not want to be an ‘organic’ intellectual, but I wanted to show that I knew how to use the working tools of intellectuals, in particular the tools of one of the most beautiful and fascinating cognitive professions, that of the historian, to be able to use them in a different way. Militant we called it then” (Bologna, 2013, p. 4).

The other two fields of research interest and personal engagement happened by chance in his path, when he had to ‘start again’ at the age of 50. The professor of the History of the workers’ movement at the University of Padova was indeed expelled in a witch-hunt climate after the raid on 7 April 1979, when the Public Prosecutor’s Office of Padua accused several intellectuals and university professors (including Toni Negri, Luciano Ferrari Bravo and Alisa del Re, etc.), as well as journalists and militants from the leftist movement *Autonomia Operaia*². In 1981, Bologna was appointed as a visiting professor at the University of Bremen, but due to a series of bureaucratic hiccups, he lost the job and was forced to move to Paris.

² See “7 aprile 1979. Errorismo di Stato, Sergio Bologna a proposito del libro di Pietro Calogero, Pm del Teorema 7 aprile”, 20th December 2010, <https://insorgenze.net/2010/12/20/errorismo-di-stato-sergio-bologna-a-proposito-del-libro-di-pietro-calogero-pm-del-%E2%80%99Cteorema-7-aprile%E2%80%99D/>.

After a period between Germany and France, Bologna went then back to Italy and began from scratch a career as a consultant for institutions, large companies, entrepreneurial associations, and trade unions. This “existential fracture”, however, was not matched by any theoretical or methodological fracture; on the contrary, his analytical approach has remained the same.

In twenty years as a consultant, Sergio Bologna has seen the transformations of labour from inside, and globalisation even more closely as an expert in freight transport and logistics at international level. In his professional life he was indeed both a civil servant and an independent professional, therefore both a salaried employee and a freelancer. This allowed him, long before other scholars and analysts, to identify the existence of significant areas of labour outside the traditional axes of work and employment, and to understand that different positions in the labour market, salaried or self-employed, strongly affect how individuals’ subjectivity is shaped and their representation of the world. His attention and analysis have focused especially on ‘knowledge workers’, which refers typically to highly dynamic workers with professional expertise.

Over the course of the last 25 years, he has also been engaged in “creating a cultural identity of freelancers in the digital era” (Bologna, 2016). Indeed, unlike many other scholars, Sergio Bologna has directly experienced labour changes from a transformative perspective. His reflections, born out of his own experience, led him to realise first-hand the need to raise awareness to collectively organise. It is therefore no coincidence that his writings inspired the founders of ACTA, the association of Italian freelancers, of which he himself later became a member and part of the Scientific Committee, taking care of international relations, and participating in the creation of the European Forum of Independent Professionals and the twinning with the US Freelancers Union. Part of this experience is reported in the volumes “Vita da freelance” (co-authored with Dario Banfi in 2011) and “The Rise of European Self-Employed Workforce” (2018).

In terms of his epistemological and methodological approach, his work is embodied, first, in the idea of studying the past to understand the present. The roots of the historical process that led to the emergence of self-employed workers' second-generation, for example, have been identified in the writings of German and Austrian sociologists and economists, such as Max Weber, Emil Lederer, Paul Drucker, and Theodor Geiger, who studied the social composition and cultural characteristics of self-employed workers in Europe between 1920s and 1930s. The term "knowledge workers" was indeed coined by Paul Drucker and came into common usage in the 1950s (see Bologna, 2018). The second cornerstone of his method is the ability to grasp the interdependence between the subject and society, between biography and history.

Focusing on his work on self-employment, in the pioneering essays published in 1997 "Ten Parameters for Defining a Self-employed Workers Statute" and "For an Anthropology of Self-employed Workers", Bologna outlined the differences between those who work for themselves and those who work as employees, that he experienced first-hand, and was then able to observe from a sort of 'safe distance'. In particular, he argues that the main distinctions lie in the perception of space and time, deployment of competences, and income (wage vs. invoice), but – unlike the US context – also in terms of demands for social rights, especially related to health care and pension. In this frame, he specifically analyses the rise in the contemporary labour market of the so-called "knowledge workers", represented by independent workers of the advanced tertiary sector, with a new lifestyle, who cannot be overlapped with entrepreneurs, nor that with the company, since they enjoy limited autonomy as the weakest party within the employment relationship. In addition, welfare systems in Europe are designed for employees, ignoring or only very marginally protecting independent professionals. This led Sergio Bologna to argue the need for representation also for the self-employed. These reflections informed the theoretical debate on "second-generation self-employment" on the one hand, and on the other were welcomed by a nascent group of workers facilitating the idea of creating

ACTA, of which Bologna was not only a member, but also a co-author of its political manifesto.

In the following, we report the most significant elements of a conversation with Sergio Bologna, paying particular attention to the interplay between labour transformations and personal commitment, as well as to the emerging trends in labour relations, in the light of the processes of hybridisation of work and employment.

AB *In a recent interview you stated that we have entered the era of hybrid labour: a third phase, after those of the worker-mass and the distinction between wage labour and self-employment (Perulli, 2022). To begin with, I would like to elaborate with you on this concept.*

SB I interpret the term ‘hybrid’ differently from the way in sociology we understand the so-called grey areas of work, which have long since become a privileged object of research. From a certain period onwards, there was talk almost exclusively of precariousness, then a little acceptance of the existence of self-employment radically different from the subordinate employment relationship. Then slowly people began to speak of grey areas and of the fact that these two cases tended to become increasingly confused. In management literature, too, there has recently been a lot of emphasis on bringing subordinate employment closer to the technology of self-employment, and there is a tendency to say that these two forms will in time converge. My idea of hybridisation is different from this idea of grey areas because I think more of working careers that today are determined by a continuous transition from different statuses. So hybrid in this sense, even if some of our latest research, for example in the audiovisual sector, has led us to discover real hybrid contracts, i.e., employment contracts that are paid half in the manner of subordinate employment and half in the manner of contract work. We still have not found many of them, while we keep encountering more and more situations

in which a person, in order to defend himself from the risks of the labour market, switches from one statute to another. It is clear that he or she accepts the job offers he is offered, sometimes out of necessity, other times because the sectors in which he or she works are characterised by certain contractual forms rather than others. I repeat, the idea of hybrid work is not the same as the idea of the so-called grey zone.

AB *The idea of this Special Issue is to question the boundaries and dichotomies that have historically characterised work, starting with the dichotomy of self-employment vs. dependent work. What are your thoughts on this?*

SB You can speak of boundaries when you accept the existence of very defined figures, different from each other. That is, you can redefine boundaries once you are talking about boundaries between two different figures, with their own characteristics. What I look at with great distrust is this form of confusion at the end, which makes me eliminate the specificity of subordination and the specificity of autonomy. These specificities must remain. Firstly because they remain in reality, it is not that you can eliminate the specificity of subordination so easily, you can do all the hybridisations you want, you can transform, you can incentivise subordinate labour so that it moves in an autonomous manner, but I find it difficult to imagine that in capitalist society the subordinate labour relationship disappears and becomes something similar to autonomous labour. Just as I find it difficult to imagine that self-employment will disappear over time. In order to redefine boundaries, they need to make sense. I see that ever since I tried to give a definition of autonomy that always retains a strong asymmetry with respect to the client, this idea of autonomy has not been accepted, because there is a tendency to say: 'then if asymmetry exists, autonomy is a false autonomy', and this is the aporia into which I think many have fallen. The fact that there is asymmetry does not mean that there is no more autonomy. You are autonomous in a number of areas: remuneration seems the most obvious thing to me.

You get paid by invoice, once you have finished the job. All these years I have always had to fight with this idea that the self-employed are bogus self-employed, because that way the problem was eliminated. That way implicitly there was no need for new welfare. Welfare is there for everyone anyway, it is enough for workers to switch to full employment status. From this perspective, how do we resolve the issue of precarious employment? We solve precariousness by making precarious workers permanent workers. In this way we thought we would also solve the welfare problem. We have spoken of autonomy also to underline the fact that welfare, as it was imagined by Fordism, is a one-way welfare, a welfare that only covers that type of employment relationship, but does not cover others, even if these others are infinitely minority. Some criticism has been raised, and it could be partly justified because we may have overestimated self-employment. When I wrote about these issues, self-employment in Italy was made up of 6.5 million people. Today it has become 4 million more or less, so there has been a decrease, but this is only in traditional self-employment, that is, first generation. Merchants, artisans, agricultural workers are decreasing, while what I have called second-generation self-employment is growing steadily. The decrease of the former is so strong that it is not compensated by the growth of the latter.

***AB** Is this asymmetry you speak of, which has led several authors to speak all too easily of false autonomy, therefore structural in the employment relationship?*

SB It is intrinsic to the employment relationship, regardless of the employment relationship. In a job performance it is always stronger who asks for it, that is the point. This discussion of asymmetry in my opinion is basic. The wrong part is to infer from the fact that there is asymmetry that there cannot be autonomy. That is the catch. I say that an asymmetry relationship arises when you have an employment relationship, a work relationship, after which

you continue to be an autonomous person, treated fiscally, treated in a social security, welfare manner. Apart from these false interpretations, the other big problem is welfare. I reproach much of sociology for not focusing sufficiently on the problem of welfare. They thought this problem was solved once you give everyone the status of employee. Why do precarious workers have the welfare problem? Because they are not employees. Make them employees, and welfare is solved. But no, we need a welfare cut even on the working conditions of the self-employed, on which very little has actually been done. In Italy something has been done with the labour statute. Some things have improved for that part of the self-employed in the separate management (i.e. the so-called 'co.co.co.' and occasional collaborations). The actions that ACTA took against the tax authorities were not aimed at traders and artisans who have their own system, they were aimed at those in the separate management (gestione separata). So, out of five and a half million contribution positions in Italy, the separate management counts for one million four hundred thousand. We are a minority component of the self-employed. There are about two million traders, one and a bit million artisans and about 500 thousand farmers. And it is a situation - this is important to say - that is very anomalous at European level. No European country has as many self-employed workers as Italy.

AB *Are there countries in which welfare models have also been developed for this component of the labour force?*

SB I will not go into detail, but in Holland and France something has been done. The experience of the United States is also very interesting, because there, in the absence of a public social security and welfare system, the self-employed did not ask for a welfare for them, they made their own insurance company. They also chose a private model, because it is basically the only

one possible. So we do not have worldwide examples, we have some steps forward on maternity, some steps forward on unemployment, etc., but it is all still to be built.

***AB** Don't you think, however, that the blurring boundaries between self-employment and wage employment have opened up some new reflections on social protection?*

SB It must be said that indeed the merit of research focused on grey areas is precisely that it has highlighted that a new welfare is necessary. From the point of view of the theories of precariousness, in short, welfare already exists. All it takes is for people to go from precarious and fixed-term to employees and we have welfare. One could never focus on this blessed problem of welfare. Self-employment was just the bogus self-employment, and the welfare system was no longer questioned once everyone was employed. Instead, when people started talking about the grey zone, it became necessary to say that for those in the grey zone, that welfare system cut only on subordinate work is not enough. It is at this point that the welfare discourse becomes more accessible, closer to our own. While I criticised the issue of the grey zone earlier - hybrid does not mean grey zone - on the other hand, I must recognise that in talking about hybridisation and grey zone, it was finally necessary to admit the need for a new welfare. It is not enough to reduce all workers to the category of subordinate. At this point, however, you could introduce - I don't know how much this applies internationally - the discourse on so-called corporate welfare. Within the employee-employer relationship, within companies, there is a lot of talk about so-called corporate welfare, which is also often looked on favourably by trade unions. I am clearly against this, because corporate welfare is a handout. A handout that is not a right. The moment an employment relationship is established, a legally founded relationship is established. So at this point your rights arise. Corporate welfare is a unilateral handout from the boss. So it falls outside the sphere of law. It is no coincidence that

this is also done to keep wages at a standstill. I don't know how much this is present in the international debate. In Italy it is important to address this issue precisely because the trade unions and many labour lawyers support it so strongly. Companies give more to workers, but not in terms of wages. You give them a voucher to buy a pair of underwear. It is precisely this gradual erosion of the concept of rights within the employment relationship that bothers me. The employment relationship ends up becoming a relationship. In the culture and mentality of many Italian bosses, they feel like benefactors when they hire people. For them it is an act of generosity, of altruism, of social conscience.

***AB** We also talk about fiscal welfare, about forms of tax deductions that are established in the employment relationship. It is an even more technical aspect...*

SB The whole discourse of precariousness is based on the existence of a multiplicity of employment contracts, each of which is fiscally more favourable to the employer than the standard employment contract. One really scrapes the bottom for economic advantage. There is the open-ended, the fixed-term, the temporary, the apprenticeship, the intermittent, the coordinated and continuous collaboration, the internship. And then you have the specific employment contracts. And each time employers have a tax discount on contributions.

***AB** Speaking instead of collective representation, how do you think it has been affected by the phenomenon of hybridisation of labour?*

SB It is true that the trade union has evolved over the years. In the beginning it probably agreed to consider the self-employed as enterprises, because that was also the position of the European Union. So if the self-employed are micro-enterprises, trade unions have nothing to do with it.

In reality it was not that easy, because there was the self-employed and so on. Then, over the years, when it became clear that with respect to the problem of the self-employed, the trade unions had to take a stand, they started to say: they are all fake self-employed and disguised subordinates. Then, at a certain point, they started to accept the idea that self-employment was something more specific, something different. And they also started to set up suitable organisations. Today they are following with interest - we too are following it - the fact that the European Union is slowly beginning to turn around and say that perhaps the self-employed are not companies, they are workers who have the right to collective bargaining. If we had continued to consider them as companies, they would have violated competition law, antitrust law, etc. when they joined forces to claim something. It is just that this step forward by the European Union that resulted in the 'Guidelines on the application of Union competition law to collective agreements regarding the working conditions of solo self-employed persons' did not go in a convergent direction to the discussion on the Directive on Platform work. And in doing so, among other things, another mistake was made, because the gig economy is not true that it only concerns platform workers. Gig literally means a performance artist in English. Then there is the other issue of lack of transparency. It is right in my opinion to define self-employment as work without employees. Some employer organisations and self-employed associations, however, because they want to represent all self-employed people, do not want to be clear about this and say that with or without employees is the same thing. This kind of reasoning serves to keep one's feet in both shoes, to be able to associate both companies and individual professionals. However, it is important to focus on self-employment without employees. So it is interesting to follow this development at EU level. The fact that they have finally moved away from this rigid position - self-employed equals enterprise - has also facilitated interest on the part of the trade unions.

AB Do you see the intervention of trade unions as decisive in this ongoing evolution and change of interpretation of the European Union on self-employment?

SB I see that this shift from dichotomy to hybridisation is changing the attitude of representation, including the trade unions. I see that the trade union finally accepts that it can think differently than it did twenty years ago. Certainly the union can have a useful function, for example in the United States there are many experiences where self-employed associations and trade unions get along perfectly well, to the advantage of both. Here, unfortunately, we still have difficulties of understanding. However, I see that a certain evolution will take place, and especially at this point I see that the trade unions accept the existence of specific organisational forms of self-employment representation. I would not like them to say that these specific organisational forms are useless, that they are there to take care of it, etc., because in these twenty years, forms of representation and organising very different from theirs have also developed. This is another element that is little emphasised by sociological research, that is, the fact that in the last twenty years a specific form of representation of the self-employed has emerged, that we must not only recognise the existence of self-employment, but we must also recognise the fact that self-employment has been able to give itself forms of union that are different from the traditional union. Another thing I think it would be useful to focus on: the difference between countries where professional orders exist and countries where they do not. Because this has meant a lot precisely in the view of self-employment. Where you have professional orders that are regulated and recognised by the state, it is different from where professional orders do not exist; therefore, a professional is like any other professional.

AB Think about the boundaries between work and private spheres. You were already talking about domestication in the 1990s, long before the pandemic. How do you see the boundaries between work and private sphere today, in the aftermath of the health emergency?

SB Perhaps we have not given it enough thought. I think the pandemic has created quite a few paradigm shifts. We know how remote working has created problems for the private sphere. Has working from home created more problems for companies or for families? I think it has created more problems for families. Because what used to be a private and family sphere has become a sphere occupied by a new entity that is the company. Something that the self-employed worker has always been used to. He theoretically has always worked in remote working. But since the self-employed are a minority, what counts in society is the change of subordinate work. Another thing: can the pathologies that developed working from home be considered occupational diseases? The pandemic has created phenomena that we have to think about, an unprecedented situation, and who knows where and how we will end up. If you add to that climate change and you start saying that this winter we will probably have to keep the temperature in our houses at 18 degrees... put the two things together and you realise that the private sphere becomes a very complex issue, which is changing much more than the working sphere. I believe that if work - with remote working - were so radically changed, companies would have a different structure. It's also true that they close branches, but it's not just that, a company that lives as a network company, it's not that when you close branches the thing changes... you continue to have a network company; therefore, you will have to deal with the subcontractor... in other words, the legal and economic relations are the same as before. Even if they have closed down the physical branches in the meantime. It doesn't seem to me that remote working has changed labour practices that much, because if it had changed them that

much, the business model would have had to change as well. And the business model does not seem to me to have changed.

***AB** I wanted to reflect on the cultural, political and educational roots that then led you to address the more general topic of self-employment and knowledge work. You have often said that your personal experience played a crucial role in thinking about self-employment. What were the other stimuli that led you to think systematically about self-employment?*

SB Certainly other stimuli had to do with '77. The first time I posed the problem... it had been posed by the movement in those years, the point was the overcoming of the paradigm of subordinate work. In '77 there was a kind of demand for precariousness: better to be precarious than tied to the same boss. That had a disruptive effect. Once you break the taboo of subordinate employment, at this point you can move on. It is clear that I also put my personal experience into it. It is one thing to go from private subordinate employment, it is another thing to go from public subordinate employment, i.e. being a civil servant is very different. Flexibilisation within companies had already started. When you are a civil servant, immovable in a certain sense, with all the characteristics of a civil servant... moreover, a civil servant engaged in cognitive work, because it is one thing to be a bureaucrat passing papers, it is another thing to be someone doing cognitive work... it was a great discovery for me to see that cognitive work done under conditions of subordination is one thing, and cognitive work in a condition of autonomy is another thing. It is a discourse on authoritativeness, authority, no small thing. A university professor is authoritative even if he is a semi-illiterate. If you are a professional, every day you have to prove your authority. You have to prove it in the field. The moment you prove it you put it on the line, and on the other side you hardly put it on the line. If you are a professional it is different, although very often your authority comes from how much you can

charge. A lawyer who has huge fees is a great lawyer. A poor devil who can't get paid that much is a bad lawyer.

AB *So it is the market that more or less mediates your status, your value....*

SB Exactly. Like the hospital doctor and the doctor who set up his own practice to make money, private and that's it. A hospital doctor makes little money, a private one makes money and is still considered a hospital doctor. The medical profession is now so little considered that they will end up like teachers. Tell me what is a profession as noble as that of the teacher, with fundamental social functions, look how it is reduced. Doctors are in danger of going the same way.

AB *Your profile is rich in contaminations. It is difficult to reconstruct your intellectual, cultural, interventionist and politically committed path in a linear manner. If we were to try to schematise and select, excluding a few equally relevant things - I am thinking of your studies on Germany - two macro-themes emerge that you have addressed with continuity: the theme of self-employment and the theme of logistics. I would like to explore with you, through the category of hybridisation, these two macro-themes.*

SB We have to start from the fact that I have had this very violent caesura in my life, determined by the fact that I built a first path entirely dedicated to historical studies, even though they were labour-related. In short, I devoted a lot of time to the study of labour history, the history of labour organisation, the history of trade unions. Then when I was expelled from university - I was suspended from teaching - it was quite a big break. That's when I started this life as a self-employed person and in order to make a living I tried to do a micro-entrepreneurial consulting business. We can say that in the first period I was always employed and in the second period I was self-employed. In this second period, the subject of logistics came up, but it was already

there before. I studied work, especially work in the metal and chemical industry, so Fiat, Pirelli, Olivetti and so on, then I worked for two years at Olivetti. At the beginning of the 1970s, when I founded the journal “Primo Maggio”, I started working in the transport sector, from maritime, port, road, and so on. The knowledge I accumulated at that time I then developed by studying freight transport, not only from the labour side but also from the service organisation side. This inevitably led me towards logistics. So while it is true that logistics was a novelty, this novelty was already present in my interest in the freight transport sector, focused on work. I was then able to delve even deeper into the subject when I went to teach in Germany, in the last months of my teaching. Incidentally, I was suspended from teaching because of a stupid bureaucratic oversight on my part, because I accepted the assignment without asking the faculty for permission beforehand. That was the excuse, let’s say... so I went to teach in Bremen, a port city and a city of ancient maritime, shipowning, insurance, financial traditions. And there I immediately started to enter this environment. Bremen is home to a research institute, the Institute for Shipping and Logistics, which has a library that I attended for ten years, thanks to which I wrote “Le multinazionali del mare” (Bologna, 2010). In addition to being a maritime and mercantile centre of long standing dating back to the Hanseatic League, Bremen is also home to this institute, which I believe was founded in the 1930s, has a library with collections and journals from the 19th century. Then, for a number of reasons related to my political mentality, I had close relations with Hamburg, and when I started to frequent the Genoese dockworkers in ‘78 we immediately went to Hamburg. I made contact with the Hamburg port world, which taught me even more. I gained experience and learnt things between Hamburg and Bremen, in short. When I finished teaching in Bremen, I moved to Paris, and I don’t know how, at some point, word got around that I had arrived in Paris. I got a call from a sociologist whose name I have now forgotten, who had set up a big research group on transport professions and invited me to join. I thus entered this circle. Paris is one of the headquarters of the OECD,

so I came into contact with the CEMT, Conférence européenne des Ministres des Transports, which today is called the International Transport Forum, where Olaf Merk works. So I joined an international network of researchers on transport and logistics. When I came back to Italy I found myself in a bit of a bind and had to invent something... except that for ten years at least no one would give me a job. That was in 1984. I left at the end of 1981, I taught in Bremen in 1982 and part of 1983. So how did I survive? I was cleared, just think, by a big figure in Confindustria, the brother of a good friend of mine, who knew my whole story, knew that I had made my bones with these people here. So at a certain moment he said: 'Look, this guy knows about it'. And from there I got my first consultancy in Italy. Then, in the first Prodi government, Burlando the Minister of Transport decided to make a general plan for transport and logistics and my name was suggested. "What is it called?" "Bologna." "Ah, I think I know him" ... because Burlando is the son of a Genoese docker. "Ah, is he the one who is a friend of the dockers of Genoa?" [laughs]. And they pulled me in. There was this somewhat adventurous but also fun path, which allowed me to go from this condition where I was doing labour history as a civil servant, to a logistics consultant. And at that point there, when I started to see what it means to work alone... I was used to the fact that on the 27th of each month they would give me my salary in my bank account, how do you want me to understand that when you make an invoice they decide to pay you when they want to and above all you get a gross sum? I mean, I wasn't used to receiving five hundred euro out of a thousand total, because half of that was all tax! Then, another incredible stroke of luck: a friend of mine introduces me to an engineer because I was looking for an office. This friend tells me that this engineer has a small company and has a spare room that he rents out. He rented it to me with secretarial services. Then we became great friends and he taught me everything. Since he has always been a freelancer he taught me how to live as a freelancer, what the tax problems are or the relationship with the client. What's more, he was someone who had some crazy orders, because he had an exclusive

licence, an exclusive product that goes into the pickling tanks in the chemical or steel industry. So his customers were giants. His orders were 200 million a year. Whether I paid him rent or not was the same. Then I met Sergio Curi, one of the top logistics experts in Italy, we started working together and it went on like that.

***AB** How did you manage to keep together the reflection on yourself, on your position as an intellectual and professional that was evolving over time, and on your activity as a consultant? Did you also manage to make these dimensions dialogue?*

SB Maybe because I kept my old political relations. I mean it was all over, wasn't it? Who remembered the 1970s anymore? But the social centres still existed. I kept going to the Conchetta. I used to go to Rome dressed up to the ministries, then I'd go back to Milan and on Saturdays and Sundays I'd maybe spend them at Conchetta, where the Cyberpunks were, etc. So, clearly I was living, I was still living my life. This also helped me, more than to maintain a lucidity, to maintain a presence in these two worlds. Primo Moroni was still alive, unfortunately he died in '98. Afterwards, I frequented those environments much less, but I always felt connected, as did the publishing house DeriveApprodi.

***AB** I ask because the risk of becoming addicted to one's work bubble is high. I mean, many people struggle to preserve private life spaces and only see their professional environment...*

SB The great good fortune was my physical endurance, because I was well into my sixties and I was also working sixteen hours a day as a consultant. Always on trains, planes, etc. Then I got over it with these heart problems, but... one who is a consultant tends to stop at fifty. Because if you really do it, it's very wearing. I mean, you really work fourteen hours a day. I

started doing it when I was almost fifty-five, and it lasted fifteen years this intense career of mine. Starting in the mid-1990s, around 2005-2006 I was already in the period where I was thinking of retiring a little bit at a time. When I was appointed president of the AIOM in Trieste (Agenzia Imprenditoriale Operatori Marittimi), in 2014 if I am not mistaken, I had already perceived it as a kind of retirement. In fact, I have done very little other consulting since then. Then, another interesting thing may be that this political activity of mine, since I started it in the early 1960s, has always taken me on an international dimension, that is, the revolution is a worldwide revolution, if you like. So from the beginning I always had relations abroad, especially with the American, radical, libertarian Marxist left. Obviously with the Germans, then with the French, with the British. When I started hanging out with ACTA, this group of self-employed workers, it immediately occurred to me to ask: "Have you looked around outside Italy?" They had never done that. And I say, 'OK, I'll start looking'. That's how I discovered other experiences and people that we had a lot to learn from. One day I get an email from London from an Italian who says: 'I found your ACTA website on the Internet. Who are you? We in London are organising initiatives with freelancers'. I got on the plane and went to London, and there we founded EFIP, European Forum of Independent Professionals. Then the EFIP experience ended. But I followed the meetings for a few years and got in touch with the Germans, the Belgians, the Dutch, the French. The experience was taken over by Francesca Pesce, who unfortunately recently died of cancer. In fact, my political experience led me to always look around. That is how I met Sara Horowitz, founder of the Freelancers Union in the United States, she also came to Italy. This international outlook is important, it is important to know how self-employed workers are conceived elsewhere, how they organise themselves. International experience has taught us a lot. Getting to know how trade unions are organised is something a bit different. I went to New York, I went to meet them, I went to their headquarters

in Brooklyn, there was still Sara who was the president, and there were 22 paid staff. In ACTA, on the other hand, we are a group of volunteers.

AB *How did you come to ACTA?*

SB By chance, surfing the Internet I discovered their site and read: 'We were inspired by the writings of Sergio Bologna' [laughs]. So I wrote: 'look, I am Sergio Bologna, I am still alive'. ACTA was not founded by me. Anna Soru founded it with other women, so I went there, introduced myself, we met, I signed up. And I immediately said: 'If you want, I'll take care of the international part...'. Anna Soru was also friends with Andrea Fumagalli.

AB *During the meeting with other self-employed associations, organised in Milan as part of the ERC project SHARE, activists from various parts of Europe came. One point that was discussed at length was: has the condition of the self-employed improved or not in recent years? I would like to bring this question back to you, based on your long experience.*

SB In my opinion it got worse. Much worse from the economic point of view. From the point of view of awareness it has improved, and this means that there is also more solidarity, more dialogue, i.e. there is more sociality. The self-employed person is no longer necessarily isolated, competing with his colleagues, and living a pretty shitty personal life. In my opinion he earns less, but at least a small minority of people have perhaps understood... I feel like I have found a group of people with whom I identify a lot. I'm not saying it's a continuation of my political activity, but it's a little bit there. They are people with whom I share almost everything. Anna Soru, Mattia Cavani... they are very good people. Whereas from an economic point of view the situation has got much worse, I think. My daughter who works in audiovisual next year will be 50 years old, and she has been working in audiovisual for 25 years. She tells me that shortly after she started she was earning three times as much. With almost all the

experience she has, she earns a third of what she earned when she had just finished her apprenticeship. The same can be said for workers in publishing, but consulting after 2008 also collapsed, even before that it was difficult. When I started working hard, the contracts I used to sign in the period from the mid-1990s onwards... any contract included an advance of 30 per cent. Apart from the fact that I had got to the point where I was writing the contracts... I was saying my figure. Then, later, clients would tell you: 'We have a budget of 20,000 euros, are you in? You have to deliver by that date...'. No advance. The first instalment at the interim report.

AB *Do you think the theses on self-employment that you developed are still valid? Would you modify anything?*

SB I think they are not very outdated. All in all I think they still work. The story about fees works, because getting paid by invoice is different from receiving a salary. Between a fee and a salary there is an anthropological leap. That has remained. The question of representation, there, perhaps it may be that it has evolved a little, for the better. Then the question of time, there too, is an indefinite time, that is, you don't have working hours. The question of 'domestication', too. The main things I said there in my opinion have not changed that much. I don't think so. It is true that I did not address the issue of hybridisation, but what do we mean by hybridisation? When they tell me that employment and self-employment are becoming more and more alike.... if you then go and see what they actually say... it is simply that subordinate employment becomes more flexible... and therefore by becoming flexible to the extreme it can appear similar to self-employment. But that is not hybridisation. It's a different matter, it's a transformation of subordinate work more than of self-employment, it's subordinate work that changes. So it depends a bit on how you use the word hybridisation. I recently published a chapter in a book dedicated to the figure of **Guido Bianchini**, a comrade of ours who worked at the University of Padua. And he, for example, had always said: 'Look, if you study Fiat...

Commentato [ab1]: verifica

Fiat is one thing... if you study Porto Marghera and the Veneto working class, it's something else, because the Veneto working class is made up of half-peasants and half-workers. They were called 'metalmazzadri'. That is, the people who work in the petrochemical industry have a vegetable garden, they have the countryside, and so this is hybridisation. So by hybridisation I mean more a condition of alternating between subordinate work and self-employment... Then it should be clarified that we keep talking about 'subordinate work', but it is one thing - I don't necessarily say a permanent job - but at least a long-term subordinate job; it is one thing when you have a fixed-term employment contract for a year or less. That is, even there, subordinate employment with precariousness is one thing, subordinate employment with a fixed job is another. There is a difference between the two. Perhaps the difference between these two is greater than between fixed-term subordinate employment and self-employment.

***AB** The reflection on professional trajectories is interesting because it leads one to think about what the reference horizon is. Stabilisation? It emerges from this dialogue that this is not necessarily so, that the idea that those who are self-employed necessarily aim to become employees with protections needs to be problematised.*

SB In my case, I saw exactly the opposite. That is, I saw people who had business experience and who at some point felt that they had accumulated so much knowledge that they could go out on their own. So the consultants were not young consultants. The typical consultant was the middle management in public industry who had worked in public industry until the age of 45 and between the ages of 45-50 set up their own consulting business. The typical consultant was this. It is clear that we cannot say that self-employment is only consultancy, but that was the classic transition from employment to self-employment, and not vice versa. It is true that the drama of self-employment is that you do not have an apprenticeship period. Where do you

learn to do it, the job? When you start, you jump in... you have to jump in... you slowly learn. The apprenticeship is very long.

***AB** In an open letter to the editors of Officina Primo Maggio that you sent us when the special issue dedicated to Primo Moroni came out, you wrote: 'I realised I made a mistake twenty years ago when I started writing about self-employment'. The mistake was not to say, because you were perhaps not aware, that the reasoning you were carrying out, when you spoke of self-employment, sanctioned the end of your relationship with workerism. Because by talking about second-generation self-employment, you were entering another symbolic order, alien to workerist culture. You were talking about work conditioned by digital techniques; you were reasoning not so much about the proletariat and the working class, but you were reasoning about the disintegration of the bourgeoisie, of the middle class. Your reasoning was more about the crisis of the concept of profession, what Duccio Bigazzi was talking about.*

SB I actually realised this bit by bit. In the workerist perspective the focus is mainly on manual labour, more or less, on blue-collar work, on the work of technicians... who are, however, skilled workers. And you are always within a proletarian worker horizon, so much so that you then talk about the proletarianisation of technicians. And so you use Marxist paradigms in a very mechanistic way. When you talk about self-employment, you move into the world of the middle class, it is another world. Marx did not speak to the middle class. That is, he said, all those who use their labour energies for pay are wage labour, which on average remains wage labour and capital. I, on the other hand, believe that the discourse is very different, especially today where you have a working class that has not so much disappeared as diminished, and you have this indefinite, very large magma, which has also lost its identity, i.e. the middle class. And so I started to reason about the crisis and the crisis of the middle class, which is a different

thing from reasoning about the crisis of working-class industrialism. There are similarities but also many differences. Surely workerism doesn't help you. What does workerism give me at this point? I have to invent all the categories. Even for the ten theses, yes, there are affinities with workerism but basically it is another way of reasoning, another type of approach. You need Marx much less. It is no coincidence that I went fishing for German Catholic sociologists, or economists like Emil Lederer. There are some Austro-Marxists who dealt with self-employment, they understood a lot about class decomposition. The others were not even Marxists, like Geiger. All of these were Catholics, they were social statisticians, they were beginning to understand that you had to group the strata of the population. It would be interesting to do a study on what kind of scientific apparatus it takes to deal with self-employment, or rather what kind of scientific apparatus those who realised that self-employment exists as a particular fact had. Especially in a liquid world... where these things don't have the fixity that they might have had in the 1800s. And then there is this idea of profession. Marx never worked on that. The sociologists began to work on it, Max Weber, but in the meantime the first and second industrial revolutions had passed. Even there they reasoned late on a very ancient category, because well or badly the profession has existed since time immemorial. The doctor has existed since time immemorial, the lawyer, the architect existed in Egyptian times. Moreover, one forgets that Weber in that Conference... Wissenschaft als Beruf - and Beruf in German does not mean 'profession' but 'vocation' - speaks of academic work. Incidentally, it is interesting that the first studies were not on liberal professions so much as on technical professions, on engineers, thus always a discourse within industry. The engineer becomes a central figure with Taylorism, Taylorism rests on the engineer. The engineer is the one with the stopwatch.

Commentato [AM2]: riusciamo a chiudere un po' meglio? magari puoi chiedere un'ultima domanda metodologica, che mi sembra non sia stata toccata per niente. Visto che nell'ultima domanda lo riporti sull'operaismo si potrebbe chiudere con il tema della conricerca, magari potresti provare a sentirlo per un'ultima domanda, anche breve, sugli attuali strumenti per comprendere i cambiamenti del lavoro e dell'identità dei lavoratori, visto che la cita

Commentato [ab3R2]: Ok glielo chiedo quando gli mando l'intervista tradotta per un suo check finale

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