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Self-Employment as a Cyclical Escape from Unemployment: A Case Study of the Construction Industry in the United States During the Postwar Period

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SELF-EMPLOYMENT AS A CYCLICAL ESCAPE FROM UNEMPLOYMENT: A CASE STUDY OF THE CONSTRUCTION INDUSTRY IN THE UNITED STATES DURING THE POSTWAR PERIOD

Marc Linder

The lateral and vertical advance of industrial capitalism during the past two centuries has ousted economically "independent" producers from their key positions within the economic system, transforming them into occupants of a distinctly peripheral role.¹ That significant numbers of unemployed workers periodically seek refuge in various kinds of self-employed activities to tide themselves over until new employment opportunities arise, underscores the subordinate macro-social status to which self-employment has been reduced.

Some controversy has surrounded the empirical issue of cyclical changes in self-employment in the United States during the post-World War II period.² Although it has been suggested that aggregate self-employment does behave

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countercyclically (Bregger, 1963)—that is, rising during periods of growing unemployment—other research has urged caution in drawing such a conclusion (Ray, 1975).

A major obstacle to meaningful empirical studies of the behavior of aggregate self-employment derives from the extraordinary heterogeneity of the self-employed as a socioeconomic stratum. Encompassing such disparate occupational agents as surgeons, corporate lawyers, athletes, and entertainers receiving the highest "earned" incomes offered by society, wealthy farmers and poverty-stricken sharecroppers, merchants, independent artisans, craftsmen and mechanics, taxicab drivers and peddlers, this grouping represents an ensemble of "life chances" as diversified as that of society as a whole. A category of socioeconomic agents defined by their ownership and operation of a business irrespective of whether they employ workers or whether their income exceeds that of an unskilled employee³ is ill designed as the object of an empirical study that presupposes the existence of a uniform and unitary response to socioeconomic stimuli.

In order to avoid some of these pitfalls, the present study focuses on a delimited and hence more homogeneous sphere of self-employment—the construction industry. The trades constituting this industry, which have accounted for one-ninth to one-sixth of all nonfarm self-employment during the postwar period (Table 1; Ray, 1975:Table 1 at 51; *Employment and Earnings* 22, no. 7, January 1976:148; *Employment and Earnings* 24, no. 1, January 1977:153; *Employment and Earnings* 25, no. 1, January 1978:155; *Employment and Earnings* 26, no. 1, January 1979:174; *Employment and Earnings* 27, no. 1, January 1980:176) represent the largest contingent of the manual self-employed (Bregger, 1963:Tables 4 and 5 at 40; Ray, 1975:50). In addition to eliminating discrepancies arising from the characteristic differences in employment security between blue-collar and white-collar workers, an examination of the construction industry with its traditionally sexually homogeneous labor force (Anderson and Davidson, 1940:178; U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 1975:Table 39 at 105 and Table 44 at 115) helps to disentangle the issue of female "attachment" to the labor force in general from that of cyclical changes in self-employment.⁴

Self-employment has long played a prominent part in the building trades (Bridenbaugh, 1950:75-76; Weyforth, 1917:181-192; Montgomery, 1927:155; Derber, 1953:1, 673, 707; Bertram, 1966:2; Beeks, 1887:123; Myers, 1945:81; *The Carpenter* 6, no. 6, 1886:3; *The Carpenter* 13, no. 8, 1893:3; *The Carpenter* 25, no. 6, 1905:12-13; *The American Architect and Building News* 82, no. 1505, 1904:33). Even today, relatively minimal capital requirements in carpentry, painting, plumbing, electrical work,⁵ and particularly in repair and maintenance work (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 1949:4) place single proprietorships⁶ within the potential reach of large numbers of skilled craftsmen (Immer, 1962:15). In view of the comparatively high levels of cyclical as well as seasonal and frictional employment experienced by contract⁷ construction workers (Mills, 1967; U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 1970), temporary shifts to self-employment

may offer a means of escaping unemployment for some building tradesmen (Landay, 1957:6; Strasser, 1970:9; Enquete über die Bauwirtschaft, 1973:II, 159-161).

In order to determine how realistic this possibility is, year-to-year changes in construction self-employment may be compared with those in unemployment. Such an approach is, to be sure, problematic inasmuch as construction workers do not represent the only source of the self-employed in construction trades whereas some formerly self-employed construction workers may seek wage-employment in other branches or leave the labor force entirely.⁸ Nevertheless, given the skills required to perform construction work on one's own account, employees of the construction industry represent the source and destination of most self-employed construction workers in transition (cf. Foster, 1970; Sommers and Eck, 1977). In the following discussion the self-employed will be examined in connection with the narrow category of "construction workers" (including working supervisors), i.e., production workers.⁹

Between 1948 and 1979, the self-employed in construction as a share of the total of the self-employed and construction workers declined from 26.5% to 23.4% (the lowest value—18.7%—was reached in 1969). This decline resulted from an increase of 92.7% in the number of construction workers, as compared with a rise of 62.7% in the number of self-employed (see Table 1). In contrast, aggregate nonagricultural self-employment accounted for a much smaller share of nonagricultural employment at the outset of the period (12.0%) and declined more precipitously (to 7.7% in 1979). Although the absolute number of nonfarm self-employed rose by 8.9%, this increase occurred exclusively between 1976 and 1979; as late as 1976 there were 420,000 fewer self-employed than in 1948.¹⁰

Between 1948 and 1975¹¹ the share of self-employment in the construction industry rose in ten of the years; eight of these increases corresponded to a rise in the rate of unemployment among wage and salary workers in private construction.¹² Similarly, eight of the eleven annual increases in the rate of unemployment were accompanied by a rise in the share of self-employment.¹³ Of these eight years, six were characterized by absolute increases in the number of self-employed;¹⁴ and of these six, in turn, five were additionally characterized by absolute decreases in the number of construction workers.¹⁵

The foregoing data suggest a pronounced countercyclical development of self-employment in the construction trades. Correlation analysis of unemployment and self-employment supports this conclusion. For the years 1948 to 1975 the rate of unemployment and the share of self-employment are positively correlated; the coefficient of determination (r^2) is 0.26. For the shorter period between 1956 and 1969 the coefficient of determination is 0.91.¹⁶ For the entire nonagricultural sector, on the other hand, a negative correlation obtains for the years 1948 to 1975, resulting in an insignificant coefficient of determination of 0.01.¹⁷ A comparison of the absolute number of unemployed and self-employed in the

Table 1. The Self-Employed, Unemployed, and Construction Workers in the Construction Industry in the United States, 1948-1979

Year	Self-Employed	Construction workers	(1) as a percent of (1) + (2)	Unemployed	Rate of unemployment
	(1) (000s)	(2) (000s)	(3)	(4) (000s)	(5) (percent)
1948	695	1,924	26.5	207	8.7
1949	687	1,919	26.4	352	13.9
1950	696	2,069	25.2	329	12.2
1951	691	2,308	23.0	196	7.2
1952	687	2,324	22.8	194	6.7
1953	655	2,305	22.1	206	7.2
1954	699	2,281	23.5	367	12.9
1955	727	2,440	23.0	333	10.9
1956	708	2,613	21.3	301	10.0
1957	736	2,537	22.5	367	10.9
1958	745	2,384	23.8	543	15.3
1959	769	2,538	23.3	481	13.4
1960	758	2,459	23.6	483	13.5
1961	727	2,390	23.3	564	15.7
1962	724	2,462	22.7	483	13.5
1963	748	2,523	22.9	476	13.3
1964	768	2,597	22.8	407	11.2
1965	730	2,710	21.2	378	10.1
1966	696	2,784	20.0	298	8.0
1967	648	2,708	19.3	275	7.4
1968	664	2,786	19.2	259	6.9
1969	685	2,973	18.7	234	6.0
1970	686	2,951	18.9	394	9.7
1971	710	3,023	19.0	447	10.4
1972	741	3,166	19.0	466	10.3
1973	803	3,325	19.5	417	8.8
1974	864	3,234	21.1	499	10.6
1975	827	2,761	23.0	831	18.1
1976	863	2,814	23.5	718	15.6
1977	933	3,021	23.6	607	12.7
1978	1,072	3,388	24.0	541	10.6
1979	1,131	3,708	23.4	548	10.2

Sources: Column (1). Self-employed in construction. 1948-60. Lebergott, 1964:Table A-7 at 516; 1961: Bregger, 1963:Table 4 at 40; 1962-75: information provided by the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics to the author, dated January 1976; 1976: *Employment and Earnings* 24, no. 1, 1977:154; 1977: *Employment and Earnings* 25, no. 1, 1978:156; 1978: *Employment and Earnings* 26, no. 1, 1979:175; 1979: *Employment and Earnings* 27, no. 1, 1980:177.

Column (2). Construction workers in contract construction. 1948-73: U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 1975: Table 41 at 108; 1974-75: *Employment and Earnings* 22, no. 7, 1976:164; 1976-79. *Employment and Earnings* 27, no. 1, 1980:205.

(Table 1. Continued)

Column (4). Experienced unemployed private wage and salary workers in construction. 1948-52: U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 1970:Table 53 at 52. Unemployed wage and salary workers in construction. 1953-59: ILO, 1960:203; 1960-61: ILO, 1964:256; 1962-75: information provided by the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics to the author, dated January 1976; 1976: *Employment and Earnings* 24, no. 1, 1977:150; 1977: *Employment and Earnings* 25, no. 1, 1978:150; 1978: *Employment and Earnings* 26, no. 1, 1979:169; 1979: *Employment and Earnings* 27, no. 1, 1980:171.

Column (5). Rate of unemployment among private wage and salary workers in construction. 1948-74: U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 1975:Table 73 at 172; 1975-77: U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 1979:213, 1978-79: *Employment and Earnings* 27, no. 1, 1980:167.

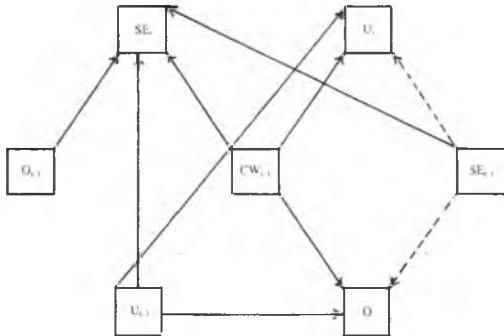
construction industry yields a considerably higher positive correlation: for the years 1948 to 1975 the coefficient of determination is 0.54.¹⁸ The aggregate nonfarm sector once again exhibits a negative correlation without statistical significance ($r^2 = 0.002$).

For the years 1975 through 1979, the highly positive correlation between self-employment and unemployment in the construction industry ceases to apply:¹⁹ an unprecedented increase in self-employment of 304,000 stands against a decrease of 283,000 in the number of unemployed. Two factors may have contributed to this new pattern. First, whereas the very high level of aggregate unemployment during these years may have encouraged the unemployed from other branches to seek employment and self-employment in construction, it discouraged those who might have left the construction industry from seeking employment elsewhere. Second, the number of new nonfarm, one-family private housing starts also grew at an unprecedented rate.²⁰ Since this subbranch of the construction industry has traditionally provided the greatest competitive opportunities for small firms (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 1970:134-135; Sumicharast and Frankel, 1970; Lasch, 1946:10, 83; Laitila, 1969-1970; National Association of Home Builders, 1959; U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 1954; Colean, 1944; Foster, 1974), the self-employed presumably benefitted disproportionately.²¹

Figures 1 and 2 present a schematic overview of the model of cyclical labor flows which was sketched above. During a recession/depression additional self-employed construction tradesmen are recruited from the ranks of construction workers and the unemployed in construction as well as from outside the industry (i.e., from among other workers and unemployed workers and those outside the labor force such as the retired). Those construction workers who cannot or do not wish to remain in the industry as self-employed become unemployed, enter other industries, or leave the labor force. Competitive conditions will also enforce a certain amount of turnover among those who were already self-employed in construction prior to this time, compelling them to make decisions similar to those of construction workers.²²

During a cyclical upswing, on the other hand, rising demand for, and wage rates of, skilled construction workers cause their ranks to be swelled by the

Figure 1. Schematic Model of the Cyclical Recruitment and Discharge of the Labor Force in the Construction Industry: Recession/Depression Phase



Notes: CW: construction workers
SE: self-employed in construction
t: this period
main flow \longrightarrow

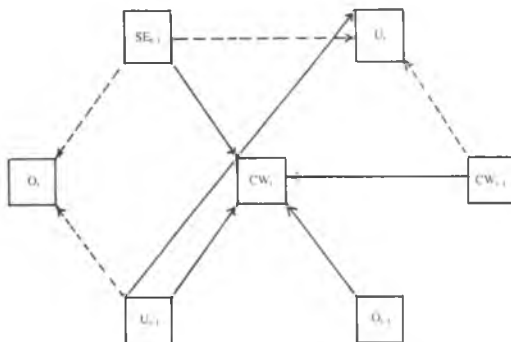
O: others
U: unemployed in construction
t-1: previous period
subsidiary flow \dashrightarrow

marginally self-employed in construction as well as by the unemployed and workers from other industries. Some unemployed construction workers and self-employed, still unable to find employment in construction, will leave the industry. A small segment of construction workers from the previous period will retire or lose their jobs (either to more-efficient workers or as a result of shifts in demand for certain types of skills).

The relative insensitivity of aggregate self-employment to changes in unemployment must be viewed in the context of the aforementioned heterogeneous composition of this stratum. Among the highly trained and well-compensated professional occupations (such as medicine and law) macro-economically determined, cyclical, intragenerational shifting between self-employment and salaried employment has traditionally been uncommon.²³ For different reasons two-way shifting within the wholesale and retail trade sector is also unlikely to be widespread: it is implausible that significant numbers of small owners close their businesses during upswings in order to take advantage of salaried employment as managers, clerks, or salespersons in larger corporate entities, planning to reopen their stores during the next period of unemployment.²⁴ Such behavior would be more common in service establishments requiring minimal capital investment; in particular less-skilled members of the labor force may be expected to display persistent shifting patterns.²⁵

Construction workers, on the other hand, have proven to be one of very few

Figure 2. Schematic Model of the Cyclical Recruitment and Discharge of the Labor Force in the Construction Industry: Prosperity Phase



Notes: CW: construction workers

SE: self-employed in construction

t: this period

main flow \longrightarrow

O: others

U: unemployed in construction

t-1: previous period

subsidiary flow \dashrightarrow

occupational groups engaged in recurrent intraindustry two-way shifting between self-employment and wage-work. Three peculiarities of the construction industry have contributed to this blurring of socioeconomic class lines (cf. Strauss, 1958:69; Seidman et al., 1958:54). First, the retardation of capital-intensive methods of industrial production (Fitch, 1948; Gangl, 1970; v. Gottl-Ottilienfeld, 1923:58; Stone, 1966; Schon, 1967:156-158; Batelle, 1967; Report of the President's Committee on Urban Housing, 1968) has preserved a quasi-artisanal skill structure among building tradesmen (Perry, 1965; U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 1959: 5, 28; U.S. Bureau of Apprenticeship, 1954). Second, the concomitant absence of phenomena of concentration and centralization of capital and labor²⁶ has provided these skilled workers with a relatively high degree of access to self-employment in general. Third, the seasonal and casual nature of employment in contract construction (Scheuch, 1951:41-42, 172; Gordon et al., 1973; U.S. Congress, 1968; Wittrock, 1967; Myers and Swerdloff, 1967; Rothschild, 1965) has induced workers to avail themselves of the opportunity to employ themselves in order to avoid unemployment without being forced to relinquish exercise of their skills.

Although the self-employed tend on the average to receive lower annual incomes than skilled building tradesmen (U.S. Dept. of Health, Education and Welfare, 1965:36, 44; Bregger, 1963:42; Ray, 1975:49), the fact that they may receive more than unemployment benefits (U.S. Dept. of Health, Education and Welfare, 1965:44; U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1975a:Series H 309-310 at 354;

U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 1970:56) doubtless encourages some construction workers to form their own businesses. But in spite of the tenacity with which the self-employed attempt to maintain their status (Steindl, 1945:61; Mayer and Goldstein, 1964:550), prolonged depressions such as that of the 1930s hasten the exodus from and inhibit the flow into small proprietorships.

Dual-class careers in the construction trades have exerted an enduring influence on the attitudes of construction workers and the character of industrial relations. Experience as owners of the means of production with the ultimate authority and responsibility for the fulfillment of contractual obligations and—in some cases—as employers of other workers may engender a degree of understanding for the viewpoint of employers among construction workers who have been self-employed.²⁷ Given the disruptive effect of cyclical self-employment on the “permanent and stable organization” (Dunlop, 1948:184) of the labor market by trade unions as well as the divisiveness involved in enforcing union standards in the case of subcontracting members (Haber, 1930:215-217), some building trades unions have prohibited members from joining the ranks of contractors (The Carpenter 10, no. 11, 1890:4; The Carpenter 11, no. 2, 1891:1; The Carpenter 12, no. 9, 1892:3; cf., however, U.S. Senate, 1885:I, 410-411).

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NOTES

1. For Marx the peripheral or quasi-extraterritorial status of independent commodity production within the capitalist mode of production was not only empirical but also categorical (1861-1863:382-384; cf. Harris, 1939:328-356). On the notion of independent commodity production as an autonomous mode of production, see Linder, 1975:151-175; cf. Blaug, 1968:238.

2. On the period prior to World War II, see Woytinsky, 1953:330-331.

3. On the so-called proletaroid self-employed, see Sombart, 1954:455-458; Geiger, 1972:30-47.

4. In 1979, for example, women accounted for 29.1% of all nonfarm self-employed but only 2.2% of the self-employed in the construction industry. Self-employed males in the construction industry accounted for 23.4% of all nonfarm self-employed males (Employment and Earnings 27, no. 1, January 1980:176-177).

5. In 1972 the average gross book value of depreciable assets for individual proprietorship establishments of single-unit companies with payroll for the four trades mentioned in the text amounted to \$4,771, \$4,985, \$14,985, and \$11,940, respectively (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1975b:Table 2 at 12-13, 15). The establishments without payroll, for which no data on assets were collected, are only one-fifth to one-seventh the size of the establishments with payroll in terms of receipts (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1975b:Table 1 at 4-5). In the same year the average special trade contractor with 10-19 employees possessed depreciable assets of less than \$50,000 (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1975c:Table B4 at 1-13).

6. Neither the monthly data on the self-employed collected by the Bureau of the Census for the Bureau of Labor Statistics nor the annual Business Tax Returns published by the Internal Revenue Service distinguish between employers and those who work "on own account" without employees. The postwar Census of Construction Industries has, however, collected data on establishments with and without payroll. Thus, in 1972 70.5% of all individual proprietors owned construction establishments without payroll (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1975B:Table 1 at 4). Beginning in 1967 the Bureau of the Census reclassified proprietors who had incorporated their businesses as employees of their new corporations (Ray, 1975:50).

7. "Contract" construction workers exclude those who work for nonconstruction businesses as well as for the various levels of government.

8. The Social Security Administration can tabulate such data (Svolos, 1966:38; cf. U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 1970:42).

9. Nonprivate wage workers have been disregarded because they experience considerably less unemployment (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 1970:38, n. 31). Elimination of unskilled workers would sharpen the focus of the study.

10. On the long-term trend of aggregate self-employment, see Denison, 1974:Table C-6 at 173; Lebergott, 1964:514, 516; Phillips, 1962.

11. The years 1975 to 1979 are discussed later.

12. The two exceptions were 1963, when a minor decline in the rate of unemployment occurred, and 1973, when the decline was steeper.

13. The three exceptions were 1949, 1953 and 1961. The mass influx of World War II veterans into construction self-employment may, by having exhausted the source of new entrants temporarily, have been responsible for the development in 1949 (Mangum, 1964:233). The Korean War curtailed opportunities for self-employment in general.

14. The exceptions were 1960 and 1975.

15. The exception was 1971.

16. Both are significant at the .01 level. The data on proprietors collected annually by the Internal Revenue service and published in its "Statistics of Income—Business Income Tax Returns" do not exhibit the same pronounced cyclicality as do the data collected by the Bureau of the Census. The definitional basis differs between the two agencies.

17. For the years 1956-1969, the correlation is positive and the coefficient of determination is 0.56.

18. Multiple correlation analysis, including lagged unemployment as a variable, revealed a still higher positive correlation.

19. For the whole period between 1948 and 1979 the correlation between the absolute number of self-employed and unemployed is positive; the coefficient of determination is 0.38.

20. Between 1975 and 1977 they rose from 892,000 to 1,451,000, or by 62.7%, to the highest level ever recorded (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1975a:Series N 159 at 639; U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1980:3). The somewhat lower level—1,194,000 units—recorded in 1979 had, prior to 1977, been exceeded only once.

21. Data from the Census of Construction Industries on single-family housing contractors are not available; among firms with payroll in 1972, such contractors employed on the average five employees compared to 9.5 for the whole industry (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1975c: Table A1 at 1-2 and Table B1 at 1-8; cf. Kaplan, 1958).

22. In point of fact, comparatively few self-employed are registered as unemployed (Bregger, 1963:42).

23. For personal professional reasons lawyers and physicians may, of course, practice individually or for institutions, corporations, or governments successively—or even concurrently. Some professions are also subject to a long-term, permanent absorption into the salariat. Lawyers in individual private practice, for example, declined from 58.3% of all practicing lawyers in 1948 to 36.9% in 1970 (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1975a:Series H 1046-1061 at 416).

24. It is more plausible, however, that in businesses operated by (unpaid) family members some of the latter leave periodically while the enterprise itself remains intact.

25. More highly skilled employees who earn a secondary income in a self-employed capacity may also have recourse to the latter for full-time work when they lose their primary employment (Ray, 1975:51). This mechanism has been repeatedly documented for part-time farmers in the Federal Republic of Germany (Preuschen, 1969).

26. In 1970, manufacturing corporations with assets in excess of \$50 million accounted for 79% of all corporate assets in manufacturing; the corresponding figure for construction was approximately 14% (U.S. Internal Revenue Service, 1970:35-36). In 1972, companies in manufacturing industries employing more than 10,000 employees accounted for 45.2% of all employees in manufacturing; the corresponding figure for constructing companies was 2.9% (U.S. Bureau of Census, 1977:142, 144, 148). Similarly, 55.6% of construction companies in 1972 employed no one, in contrast with 7.8% of manufacturing companies (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1977:142, 144, 148).

27. A study of West German industrial workers who also worked part-time in a self-employed capacity pointed out that industrial enterprises desired employees who appreciated the social significance of privately owned productive property (Wagener et al., 1959:98; Linder, 1974).

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