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A new mystique? Working for yourself in the neoliberal economy

Stephanie Taylor

Abstract

This article discusses the growing UK trend of people working for themselves. Beginning with the example of a media representation, it explores the wider implications of a discursive drift by which discourses of entrepreneurialism and contemporary creative work converge on the new figure of the worker who leaves paid employment for the supposed satisfactions of working from home. The article argues that, in contrast to the heroic masculine figures of the entrepreneur and artist, this is a feminised low-status worker. Its celebration is part of a 'new mystique' resembling the 'housewife trap' described by Friedan (1963) half a century ago, because for increasing numbers of people, both male and female, working for yourself amounts to exclusion to an almost subsistence level of economic activity on the margins of the neoliberal economy.

Keywords: entrepreneurialism; creative work; feminisation; discursive drift

Introduction

Growing numbers of UK workers in a wide range of fields are now involved in some arrangement of working for themselves, including self-employment, freelancing or running their own small businesses. Research indicates that many of these workers suffer the uncertain incomes, fragile career trajectories and general precarity which have long been recognised as the experience of workers in the cultural and creative industries (eg Gill and Pratt, 2008). In addition, recent media representations exemplify a discursive drift by which working for yourself in any field is characterised using the now established discourses of contemporary creative work, including the associations with art which have functioned as an attraction for creative workers, a focus for their aspirations, and an inducement for them to tolerate difficulties and uncertainty (eg McRobbie, 1998; Taylor and Littleton, 2012). This article argues that central to this discursive drift is neither the 'fundamentally masculine' (Ahl and Marlow, 2012) figure of the successful entrepreneur nor the masculine artist but a novel, feminised (though not inevitably female) figure, who works on a small scale, mostly alone and from home, motivated by the hope of self-fulfilment and freedom as alternative rewards to a steady income and secure employment. The article proposes that this feminised figure is part of a 'new mystique', resembling the 'housewife trap' made famous by Betty Friedan (1963), which invited women to move back from the paid workforce to the home and domesticity. The new mystique attached to working for yourself is part of a process of exclusion by

which increasing numbers of workers, both male and female, are encouraged to accept a marginalized position in the neoliberal economy.

The first section of the article describes the trend and situation of people working for themselves, drawing on recent research. The next section discusses one example of a recent media representation of these workers to draw out some of the parallels with work in the contemporary cultural and creative industries (CCI) and outline the discursive drift by which discourses of entrepreneurialism and creative work converge. The following sections discuss two figures central to these discourses, the entrepreneur and the creative artist, to show their gendering and explore its wider implications, including in relation to home as the site in which people are working for themselves.

Working for themselves: the people and the problems

Statistics on employment in the UK indicate that an increasing number of people are working for themselves. Discussion is complicated by the variety of possible arrangements and categories: these people include those described as self-employed, freelance or owning their own small businesses, with some differences of meaning in those terms. A recent UK report by Conor D'Arcy and Laura Gardiner refers to the 'self-employed' and cites the following definition from EUROSTAT: 'Self-employed persons are the ones who work in their own business, farm or professional practice' (quoted in D'Arcy and Gardiner, 2014: 8). However, the authors note that other criteria may be used, including for tax purposes. Their own definition includes individuals who run their own businesses, with the possibility of hiring other people; provide their own equipment and decide when, how and where to work; and have several customers at the same time. Like the EUROSTAT definition, this encompasses terms used by other sources on employment research, including, to cite a few examples from different national contexts, 'homeworking' (Dex, 2009), 'home-based businesses' (Clark and Douglas, 2010; Loscocco and Smith-Hunter, 2004) and 'home-based work' (Tietze *et al.* 2009). For the purposes of this article, my interest, paralleling D'Arcy and Gardiner's, is in people who are in an alternative situation to full-time paid employment by others, and work largely or entirely from home. Hereafter I adopt the language of particular sources when citing them and otherwise refer to these people as working for themselves.

D'Arcy and Gardiner (2014) report that self-employment has been increasing in the UK since the 1960s but has accelerated since 2008 to the point that in 2014 the self-employed amount to nearly 15% of all employment, or one in seven. D'Arcy and Gardiner interpret the increase partly as a structural change, reflecting general changes in the way people work which include rises in portfolio careers and precarious working. (These have been widely discussed as features of work in the cultural and creative industries, or CCI: eg Gill and Pratt, 2008). However, they suggest that the increase in self-employment is also partly cyclical and an effect of the recession, in that some people are becoming self-employed because paid employment is not available. There are also increasing numbers of people who are self-employed part-time, sometimes combining this work with paid employment.

Describing the UK self-employed, D'Arcy and Gardiner (2014) note that there has been an increase in the proportion who are women, although this is still less than half overall and smaller than the

proportion in other OECD countries. (On various definitions, 2011 figures showed the proportion of UK women working for themselves was below the OECD average: OECD, 2013: 69.) There are also increasing numbers of older self-employed people, including those over 60. Mirroring trends in the workforce as a whole, self-employed and employed, there has been an increase in the proportion of self-employed people educated to degree level or higher and working in service sectors; 18% more in information and communications, 10% more in arts and leisure and 49% in other service sectors. Some of these will include workers in the CCI which, as a sector, has been noted to have a very high proportion of 'micro-businesses' (Miles and Green, 2008).

Earlier research provides some general background on why working for yourself might appear an attractive option. In a review of survey-based research on work, Shirley Dex (2009) notes that in the late 20th and early 21st century the UK workforce has become both better qualified and more dissatisfied. There has been an increase in work strain, especially among women employees, and also a general decline in 'rates of organisational commitment, or commitment to the organisation's values'. Dex notes that these were 'very low among employees in Britain around the turn of the Millennium', 2009: 17. Workers are less deferential and expect more autonomy than in the past. Dex also reports that, despite predictions in the 1960s that people would become more instrumental, working primarily for money and losing 'the traditional work ethic', recent surveys indicate that UK workers are still committed to 'work as a central life interest' and they value 'intrinsic aspects of work and having interesting work' over 'a high income' (2009: 16). Although she acknowledges the difficulty of prediction, Dex proposes that 'The trend towards so-called *humanization* of work is likely to continue', for instance, through opportunities for 'increased autonomy', 'self-development' and 'greater employee involvement' (2009: 18). The dissatisfactions and expectations she describes suggest that people who are unhappy working for others, eager to do interesting and satisfying work which uses their skills, and willing to risk some earning disadvantage, might see working for themselves as a desirable alternative to paid employment which offers the 'humanization' they are seeking.

Research on people starting their own businesses has indicated that 'lifestyle issues' are more likely to motivate women than men (Walker and Webster, 2007: 125) and a particular group working for themselves are those who researchers have dubbed 'mumpreneurs', that is, women who 'set up a business in order to enable them to both work and care for young children' (Duberley and Carrigan, 2012: 629). Carol Ekinsmyth offers a more specific definition, that the mumpreneur has '*configured* her business around her caring role rather than simply juggling the two' (2013: 2, emphasis in original), facilitated by new ICTs. (Ekinsmyth notes that this definition could equally embrace a male parent.) She suggests that mumpreneurship is a 'spatial phenomenon' since it involves 'creatively building businesses around the sociospatial routines of daily childcare' (2013:2). The key space would seem to be home as the double site of living and earning.

An optimistic view of the phenomenon of mumpreneurship could be that it amounts to a reconstruing of business practice in order to take account of additional, non-economic values, thereby achieving some of the humanization referred to by Dex (2009). However, researchers have found that women who attempt to reconcile the demands of a business with domestic responsibilities are likely to experience long working hours, conflicts around space and time which result in 'tension and stress' (Thompson *et al.*, 2009: 229), and also reduced returns and survival

prospects. Rather than being a magic solution, mumpreneurship is therefore potentially 'a 'no win' situation' (Thompson *et al.*, 2009: 235). Other researchers suggest that mumpreneurs are additionally likely to be overburdened because they are attempting to reconcile a business career with contemporary requirements for a form of intensive mothering which is 'wholly child-centred, emotionally involving and time-consuming' (Duberley and Carrigan, 2012: 633) and even a 'fetishization of the maternal' (Littler 2013).

The problems of mumpreneurs echo those found to be part of the more general experience of working for yourself. For anyone working at home, the boundaries between work and non-work time are likely to become blurred so that work overflows into other areas of life. (This kind of overflow is exacerbated by new technologies, in the phenomenon which Gregg, 2011, calls 'presence bleed'.) Another problem is the loss of the social contacts obtained in more conventional working situations. D'Arcy and Gardiner (2014: 19) report that 83% of the self-employed do not employ anyone else and Dex (2009) has noted the isolation faced by people who work from home in any capacity, whether as casual workers, employees or 'entrepreneurs'. On the financial side, D'Arcy and Gardiner suggest that their research 'paints a worrying picture of the security and vulnerability of self-employed people' (2014: 5). The self-employed are a cause for concern since they earn less than the employed (typically, about 40% less, though part of this may be due to reduced hours) and their earnings have fallen faster in the recession than the earnings of the employed. They are also less likely to be contributing to a pension. D'Arcy and Gardiner's (2014) evidence of the lower earnings of self-employed people is echoed by research on home-based businesses which has found that these 'are likely to be relatively small in scale, insecure and offer poor returns' (Thompson, Jones-Evans and Kwong, 2009: 228). A further finding is that such businesses have poor prospects for growth.

The new entrepreneurs?

The trend of working for yourself has received considerable media attention in UK 'quality' papers. Some recent articles refer to the problems ('Many 'self-employed' women earn less than £10,000 a year': Fisher, 2014) but many, perhaps unsurprisingly, tend to be upbeat. For example, one headline claims 'Generation of entrepreneurs grows up in the downturn' (Allen, 2014), although the sub-head warns 'More jobless youth are choosing self-employment but it's not an easy option'. A Technology feature 'The Best of British Startups' celebrates 'technology clusters' as part of an 'urban renaissance' and 'a broader economic story, with more new businesses started in the UK last year than at any time in our history' (Silva, 2014). Another article notes that 'More than 520,000 new businesses registered with Companies House during 2013, a rise of 8% on 2012 and a record high, according to website StartUp Britain' (Prosser, 2014: n.p.).

A further article which I will discuss in detail, by Emine Saner, was published on *The Guardian* website on 24 November, 2013 with the more ambivalent headline 'Cottage industries: all homework and no play?' (Saner, 2013a), and then, in a slightly abridged version, with a different headline, 'Home Alone', in the print edition of the same newspaper on Monday 25 November 13 (Saner, 2013b). Both versions are sub-headed with the claim that 'Cottage industries are booming in the UK – the number of people working from home has doubled in the past 10 years', firmly presenting the people discussed as examples of a trend. The article invites readers to meet sixⁱ 'entrepreneurs' who work from home, three women and three men 'whose longest commute is to

their kitchen'. The reference to 'cottage industries' in the headline (Saner, 2013a) is yet another variation on the terminology for working for yourself. The word 'cottage' perhaps adds an implication of tradition and even cosiness but this term is not used by any of the interviewees, at least as they are quoted. Instead, three of the six refer to having 'a business' or 'a company' so correspond to the situation variously described by research sources as a 'home-based business' (eg Clark and Douglas, 2010; Loscocco and Smith-Hunter, 2004), small business or 'micro-business' (eg Miles and Green, 2008). The other three describe themselves differently. One refers to 'working from home', which he contrasts with two previous experiences, working for a company, and employing other people. Another has 'an office at home' and 'about 40 clients', and the last refers to himself as 'freelance' and 'self-employed'.

Saner's article follows a familiar journalistic format in which the six people featured are presented in turn, with accompanying photos. Two are in the fashion industry, one as a designer of ethically sourced clothes and the other, formerly a teacher of fashion design, running a children's clothing company. Two of the interviewees exemplify the novel occupations generated by social media: one is a social-media consultant and one a former designer who is now a design blogger. The fifth interviewee is a taxidermist who emphasises that his work, whether on commission or for 'stock' pieces that he will sell, is motivated by his passion for wildlife. The sixth interviewee is a recruitment consultant for 'high-calibre staff... managing directors or part-time financial directors'. Their supposedly first person accounts appear to have been edited down from answers to questions (which are not included) about their respective employment histories, financial situations, motivations for working from home and day to day working experience. Because of the editing process, it could be argued that the article presents the author's rather than the interviewees' claims and positionings, since the latter are quoted selectively. Here, my interest is in the whole article as one among the related media representations.

A first point to note is that the article is extremely positive in both its overall narrative and in some of the interviewees' specific claims. The shift to working for yourself is presented as an improved situation for each of them, and a solution to previous problems or dissatisfaction. For example, one interviewee says: 'At one point, I was employing eight people but I didn't like the relentlessness of it'. He now works by himself, on a smaller scale and with a lower turnover, because 'It is more important to me to do good work'. Another comments 'I don't think I could go back to being an employee'. Two of the interviewees fit the category of mumpreneurs, discussed in the previous section. One of them gave up 'a really good job' to run a children's clothes company from home because she did not want to 'work long hours with a commute and three children in childcare'. She is 'happier to have a cut' in her income than return to her previous commuting situation because 'the bonus for me is that I can work around my children'. The second woman had taken a career break when she had her children and did not want to return to a job in the City with 'very limiting' hours and a long commute. She set herself up as a recruitment consultant and now organises her work time 'so I can fit it around my children'. She received help from 'other mothers' to set up the business initially and now lists many women with children among the candidates for whom she finds work.

Although the overall implication of Saner's article is that the positives of working for yourself outweigh the negatives, it does acknowledge the kinds of difficulties discussed in the previous

section, including in its headline 'Home alone'. Alongside a few mentions of the flexibility of working for yourself, such as 'sneaking away' if there's 'a lull', there are many references to hard work and long hours. Interviewees describe having no holidays, as already quoted, working in the evenings, having 'less time to spend with friends' and getting a dog as an incentive 'to get me out of the house'. The two mumpreneurs organise their work around their children: 'Once they're asleep at night I can carry on if there are still things to do'. Interviewees are also quoted as referring to loneliness: 'I do miss working with a group of people at times'; 'It can be a bit lonely'; 'It can be a bit of a downer being by yourself'. Most notably, all of the accounts contain some reference to precarious financial situations: 'Any profit I make I put back into the company. I don't have sickies'; 'it's not lucrative'; 'It was tough financially to begin with'; 'I'm currently having to spend vital cash flow on legal fees to protect my intellectual property'; 'It does get a bit scary when the money isn't coming in quite as regularly'; 'I'm making the most of it while it lasts because you never know what's going to happen'. The article also indicates that for at least an initial period, all of the interviewees depended on other financial support, provided, respectively, by a spouse, 'an investment portfolio', alternative forms of work, and the redundancy payment from a previous job.

The article is summarised here in some detail because of the apparent parallels with work in the contemporary cultural and creative industries. Echoing researchers' findings that cultural and creative workers claim to 'love' what they do (eg Gill, 2007; Taylor and Littleton, 2012), Saner's interviewees' accounts refer to 'passion': 'doing something that is your passion'; 'I'm passionate about wildlife'; 'It's a job I'm passionate about so it's quite easy to keep motivated'. Creative work is regarded by its practitioners as personal in the sense of being closely matched to their interests and experience (Taylor and Littleton, 2012) and the accounts in Saner's (2013a) article indicate a similar emphasis, for example, in the many references to what the various interviewees 'want' and what is 'important to me', as does the more general narrative of the article, that financial precariousness, long hours and loneliness are compensated by the satisfaction of pursuing a personal project or vocation. The accounts in Saner's (2013a) article also accord with Mark Banks' claim that many creative workers are motivated by 'a multitude of moral and political impulses' (2007: 187). For example, the first interviewee in the article is a fashion designer who had previously worked for companies in which 'their priorities were margins and profits'. She explains that she started her own business because she wanted instead 'to produce my own designs, but in a more responsible, thoughtful way. I wanted clothes that were still beautiful and well-cut... but were still ethically sourced', made from sustainable fabrics. Another interviewee claims as an additional benefit of running a business that 'I feel I'm helping indirectly to generate a manufacturing base in this country again, however small. I do feel proud of that'.

What then is the significance of these parallels and overlaps with creative work? The contemporary creative sector has always been broadly defined (eg Department of Culture, Media and Sport, 2001) and Fuller et al (2013) suggest that recently the reference of creativity 'has expanded to include virtually all the performative labours producing the information economy, from computer coding to legal research' (2013: 144). It would therefore be possible to argue the specialisms of at least some of the six home-based interviewees in Saner's (2013a) article locate them *within* the sector, as creative workers. However, this is not how Saner categorises them. Rather, the parallels which I have described are a further example of a discursive drift by which discourses of entrepreneurialism and creative work converge. The significance of the drift becomes clear through a closer examination

of the gendering of two figures, the creative artist and the entrepreneur, which are central to these discourses and underlie discussions of people working for themselves, including in Saner's article.

Gendered figures

This section will consider the implications of the images of two figures associated with contemporary work. The first is the entrepreneur whose personal enterprise, such as a willingness to pursue opportunities and take risks, is of course central to the market-driven accounts of economic development associated with neoliberalism. The entrepreneur is also associated with working for yourself. D'Arcy and Gardiner note that: 'For those who see high rates of self-employment as positive, much is made of the entrepreneurialism and innovation associated with going it alone' (2014:17). Also, since 2011, unemployed people in the UK who become self-employed have been able to claim the New Enterprise Allowance (NEA), apparently in an expectation that the imagined inactivity of the unemployed person will be transformed into the commendable activity of the entrepreneur. The second figure is the creative artist or auteur (McRobbie, 1998) whose image underlies many now-established understandings of careers and work practices in the CCI. The congruence between the agentic individual figures of the entrepreneur and the creative artist, pursuing their respective business and creative projects, was recognised in early discussions of the CCI. Kate Oakley (2009) notes that entrepreneurship has been a key notion in the policies which defined cultural and creative industries in the late 20th and early 21st centuries (p.291). Angela McRobbie, discussing young fashion designers in the 1990s, saw a 'fusion of entrepreneurial values with a belief in the creative self, with the latter providing a rationale for the former' (McRobbie, 1998, p. 83).

A less commonly noted connection is that the entrepreneur and the creative artist are both masculine figures. Helene Ahl and Susan Marlow (2012) suggest that, 'the defining characteristics of the entrepreneur are also those which define masculinity' (p.544). Ahl (2006) analysed research articles and 'foundational' economic texts about entrepreneurs, referring to an index of the characteristics associated with masculinity and femininity compiled by the psychologist Sandra Bem. Ahl's finding was that the attributes of the entrepreneur are both positive and masculine; the femininity characteristics identified by Bem were either the opposite of entrepreneurial, or not related to it at all. Ahl concludes that the image of the entrepreneur is that of 'a heroic self-made man' (2006, p.599). In a strikingly similar summary, Alison Bain (2004), discussing female artistic identity, writes: 'In contemporary Western mythology, the artist is understood to be male. The dominant cultural myth is of the "artist as male hero"' (p. 172). This probably derives from the celebrated named figures of European art, especially in the 19th century, the vast majority of whom were men.

Subsequent to McRobbie's claim, quoted above, researchers have explored in more detail how contemporary creative workers are influenced by the image of the artist, including how the value attached to being creative can lead them to blur the boundaries between work and non-work, and to accept uncertain career trajectories and limited financial rewards for their work (at least in the short-term) (Taylor, 2011; Taylor and Littleton, 2012). However the research indicates that the aspirations of contemporary creative workers are not wholly consistent with an elite masculine artist figure who pursues a creative vocation with ruthless selfishness, occupying an outsider position

because he rejects the values and conditions of participation in the mainstream economy. Instead, many workers appeared to be influenced by a creative figure who occupies a different kind of marginalised economic position, turning away from participation in the competitive context of professional 'art worlds' (Becker, 1982) in order to carry out an almost therapeutic, personal creative project. In the terms of a 'hierarchical gendered ordering where femininity is associated with deficit' (Ahl and Marlow, 2012: 545), this is a feminised figure, consistent with the larger sociological thesis of the feminisation of work as a general contemporary phenomenon which impacts on both women and men (eg Adkins and Jokinen, 2008). The feminisation thesis is complex but two key arguments are that with the spread of short-term employment and portfolio working, the 'atypical and precarious working conditions that formerly fell to women are currently becoming common among men as well' (Veijola and Jokinen, 2008: 175), and that contemporary work increasingly requires forms of relating and communication skills which entail the emotional work and 'affective labour' conventionally done by women more than men. It is this second, feminised creative figure, I suggest, who is more relevant to the discursive drift described in the previous section, and to the situation and aspirations of the people working for themselves who are the focus of this article.

A new mystique

As Saner's headline 'Home Alone' indicates, for many people working for themselves, the site of their work is also the place where they live. Home as a place of work has complex, and of course gendered, associations which are further complicated by the discursive drift between creative work and working for yourself. Conventionally, home is the site of the unpaid domestic work of women, and its supposed attractions (some of which are indicated in Saner's article) derive in part from the disconnect with paid employment. Home is a place of freedom in contrast to the restrictions of conventional workplaces, a place to be with children instead of apart from them, a place in which personal values can be prioritised and, from all of these expectations, a place in which the worker is able to be whole or complete, retaining some authenticity of self which is assumed to be lost or at least jeopardised in the conflicts of different, larger employment contexts. Such positive images are central to discussions of work-life balance which generally assume some process of encroachment or contamination whereby the larger worlds of work threaten the containment of the home (eg Gregory and Milner, 2009).

A different set of associations follow from the Romantic associations of the workshop and studio as spaces in which creative makers both live and work. The workshop is associated with the continuation of work outside the capitalist economy. It is implicitly contrasted with the separated work and living spaces of industrialised working life, the factory and the home, and therefore with the alienation of the industrial factory worker whose work is only for others. However, it is a masculine space because it is the site for non-domestic work, for the activities of the craftsman, in contrast to the conventional crafts of women (for instance, in textiles) most of which are directly linked to the home. The image of the studio is also masculine, heavily influenced by biographies of 19th century European male artists which were publicised as selling points for their work (eg White and White, 1965). As part of the elite masculine image of the artist, the studio is a site for painting or other creative work, and also sleeping, eating, drinking, and receiving visitors and prospective buyers who come to view work. It is a space of relative poverty, following from the rejection of participation in 'ordinary' work or routine employment in the capitalist economy, and of responsibility for earning

to support other people financially. It is also, however, a space of privilege, in that a choice has been made to prioritise creative work over the claims of others. The 'selfishness' of this prioritizing, to use a term from contemporary creative workers' own accounts (Taylor and Littleton, 2012), conflicts with the other-directedness that operates not only in caring roles, such as parenting, but also more generally as part of a contemporary feminine identity (Taylor, 2011).

Alison Bain (2004), conducting research with Canadian women visual artists found that possession of a studio was a 'powerful identity marker for them' precisely because of the gendered associations. Having a studio functions as part of these women's claim to belong to a profession which is still largely male-dominated. But although it was the aspiration of Bain's participants to have their own studios, she found, in an example of the difficulties of resisting expectations of other-directedness, that many of the women also had to fight to *protect* their claims to the studio as their own space, for example, if it was in or near a family home, to close the door and resist the encroachment of other people and their belongings.

For people working for themselves, the reassurances of home as a safer place and the creative promises of the workshop and studio as living/working sites potentially merge in the feminized creative figure discussed earlier, to promote a withdrawal from the challenges of paid employment and a return to this more private and personalized site. This kind of "'turning away" from wider social issues and publics' (Littler, 2013: 235) has been described as a contemporary 'retreatist fantasy' (2013: 239). It also recalls the fantasy discussed by the US feminist writer Betty Friedan in the early 1960s. She argued that women's hard-won fights for the right to escape from home, become educated and work as professionals were being subverted through a revived 'mystique of feminine fulfilment' (1963:18) which was supposedly to be attained through women's return to the home and domesticity. The mystique was reinforced institutionally, for example, through college courses which educated women to be good wives and mothers. Friedan suggested that, as a consequence, a new generation of women were suffering 'by choosing femininity over the painful growth to full identity, by never achieving the hard core of self that comes not from fantasy but from mastering reality' (1963: 181). (This of course invokes again a deficit model of femininity.) The tone is harsh. Friedan criticises a 'sick society' which ignores and wastes women's strength and abilities. Then she suggests:

'Perhaps it is only sick or immature men and women, unwilling to face the great challenges of society, who can retreat for long, without unbearable distress, into that thing-ridden house and make it the end of life itself' (1963: 232).

The contemporary self-employed, freelancers and owners of small businesses, female and male, who are the focus of this article, would probably distance themselves from such narrow ambitions, yet the celebrations of working for yourself which this article has discussed can be seen as the latest variant of the phenomenon which Friedan (1963) describes and as part of a new mystique which again potentially excludes women, and others, by encouraging them to return home, in the guise of a different set of priorities.

Interestingly, Friedan herself referred to such variants. Her criticisms extended to 'women with 'small businesses that open and close with sad regularity' (1963: 347). She also noted, sarcastically, the attraction of creative work:

‘The “arts” seem, at first glance, to be the ideal answer for a woman. They can, after all, be practiced in the home. They do not necessarily imply that dreaded professionalism, they are suitably feminine, and seem to offer endless room for personal growth and identity, with no need to compete in society for pay’ (1963: 348).

However, she went on to separate the situation of the ‘amateur or dilettante’ from professional women creatives (1963: 348). The distinguishing features of the latter, in her account, are that they enter the competition, seeking appropriate pay, peer recognition and social status. More generally, she is arguing for the fuller participation of women in contrast to their exclusion at home: a woman needs ‘work in which she can grow *as part of society*’ (1963: 345 - emphasis added).

A premise of Friedan’s argument is therefore that such work exists out there, in society, to be won through effort, even if there are barriers to break down. The different circumstance of many of the people working for themselves in the UK today is that the work may not be there, because of the recession and, in the longer term, because of the structural changes which have resulted in more and more precarious working. Other writers (eg Morgan and Nelligan, this volume) have noted that neoliberal economies require a new kind of worker. This is a person who is mobile and malleable, infinitely energetic and ambitious, living in the present and ready to adapt to the immediate demands of changing markets. The ultimate false promise of working for yourself may be that it offers a viable alternative for people who do not conform to this masculine ideal, for instance, because of their caring responsibilities, maturity or work history.

Conclusion

This article has discussed the current trend of people working for themselves, exploring one newspaper article as an example of media representations of such workers. Following the premises of a narrative-discursive approach (eg Taylor and Littleton, 2006, 2012), a newspaper article like that by Emine Saner (2013a, b), however conscientiously sourced, can be analysed as a construction. It invokes well-established notions and narratives, such as those linked to entrepreneurial and creative discourses. The recognisable and familiar character of these discursive and cultural resources is what makes the construction persuasive, because it apparently makes sense.

Saner’s article presents a range of people who turn from paid employment to working for themselves, thereby achieving a better lifestyle and resolving conflicts, for example, between earning and caring for children. The article invites identification with this supposedly liberated new kind of worker. Littler (2013: 228) notes that the ‘formulation’ of a figure as a social type can be ‘actively used’ within a certain context to shape ideas about a role and way of living. In these terms, the presentation of working for yourself in Saner’s article and others can be understood as ‘part of the process whereby contemporary media negotiate a work world where, whether by accident or by design, “the individualism of self-realization... has... become an instrument of economic development”’ (Couldry and Littler, 2011: 268, citing Honneth, 2004). However, in contrast, to the heroic and masculine figure of the conventional entrepreneur, the hypothetical new worker is a feminised figure, retreating from the pressures of the conventional working world and often accepting an almost subsistence level of earning on the margins of the neoliberal economy.

A conventional narrative of entrepreneurship, consistent with the market-driven focus of neoliberalism, is that the currently small-scale projects of the people now working for themselves will expand to drive future economic development; this is the narrative attached to the New Enterprise Allowance. However, an alternative view, more consistent with feminisation, would be that people working for themselves are not the potential drivers of future prosperity but the marginal figures excluded from it. This interpretation is supported by D’Arcy and Gardiner’s (2014) finding that the growth in the self-employed is partly accounted for by people over 60, many of whom work part-time, and that another significant group are people who are self-employed as a second job. They do not appear in the self-employed statistics at all but amount to about 1% of all employees! (D’Arcy and Gardiner, 2014: 18). Taken together with the cyclical rise in self-employment, these statistics and the example of mumpreneurs suggest that the relevant narrative of working for yourself may be less about career beginnings, prospective expansion, ambition and entrepreneurial success than about sustaining yourself through difficult circumstances, like unemployment, and coping with inadequate pensions, insufficient earnings and the need to raise the next generation. The move from conventional employment to this new situation, presented positively in Saner’s article, is of course a move to precariousness consistent with the general thesis of the feminisation of work. The larger narrative of neoliberalism here is that of creeping privatization, exclusion and the personalization of responsibility for dealing with circumstances – retirement, caring responsibilities, unemployment and under-earning – which formerly warranted support from a welfare state.

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ⁱ There are six in the online article and five in the shorter print version.