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SPECIAL ISSUE

Entrepreneurship as Self-improvement: Stories of Freedom and Precarity among Self-employed People on the Move in São Paulo and Barcelona

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Abstract

Research on neo-nomadism has focused mainly on privileged forms of lifestyle migration, portraying these practices as individual choices but paying little attention to their embeddedness in constraining socio-economic structures. Yet, neo-nomadic practices are increasingly involving lower- to middle-class people. They may experience a sense of freedom and subjective upward social mobility; however, their lives are also marked by precarious conditions. We investigate this tension through ethnographic research and interviews with digital nomads in coworking spaces in Barcelona and street vendors in São Paulo. We analyse the links between self-employment and neo-nomadism in their trajectories by drawing on literature on subjective social mobility. We find that emic definitions of “moving up” among our research participants involve three existential dimensions: (1) the quest for freedom, or the subjective sense of social mobility associated with mastering one’s time and choices; (2) the valuation of flexibility, or positive imaginaries of (transnational) spatial mobility and its advantages; and (3) the desire for personal growth, connected with discourses of self-improvement, self-reliance, and individualisation. We argue that entrepreneurship can be analysed as a frame for developing self-reliance and self-improvement in neoliberal contexts where individuals face increasing levels of uncertainty and precarisation.

Keywords

Digital Nomads, Entrepreneurship, Mobility, Self-employment, Subjective Social Mobility, Street Vendors

Introduction

As transport and communication technologies have improved dramatically over the past decades, migration and other forms of spatial mobility have become available to a larger group of individuals worldwide. At the same time, restrictive mobility regimes (Glick Schiller and Salazar) continue to shape the way people move across borders, creating difficulties in obtaining visas and residency/work permits. Contemporary mobility practices are increasingly anchored in short-term temporalities (Gibson et al.; Moret, *European Somalis*), and for many people, connections across national and transnational space are part of their daily social and economic activities (Yeung). In this context, neo-nomadism refers to the idea of living without a territorial anchorage (Engebriksen). This label has been applied to the experience of spatially mobile people seeking freedom and autonomy and has also been associated with expressions of political dissent (Forget and Salazar; Sandoz et al.). According to the study by Anthony D'Andrea, nomads voluntarily reject national arrangements and predominant cultural norms and adopt alternative practices and ways of living. In doing so, they occupy a marginal position within society, forging a new identity freed from classical state- and border-based determinations.

Most studies on neo-nomadism have primarily portrayed mobility practices anchored in short-term temporalities as individual choices (Hannonen). Little attention, however, has been paid to the way these practices are embedded in power-loaded socio-economic structures. Lower-, middle-, and upper-class people from different geographical and social contexts may opt for mobility because it provides a sense of control over one's life, yet mobility may also result from sustained economic precarity. In this sense, neo-nomadic patterns can be analysed as a necessity, as certain people must remain spatially mobile and flexible to subsist. Moreover, without necessarily claiming any specific counter-hegemonic identity, transnationally connected people may engage in nomadic practices as a way to navigate structural constraints and allow for personal development. Combining their spatially mobile lifestyle with entrepreneurial activities, they may find a pathway to upward social mobility despite adverse socioeconomic contexts. As a normative discourse valorising independence and flexibility (Amigot Leache and Martínez Sordoni; López and Gómez; Bröckling), entrepreneurship offers them a reference point from which to positively assess their unstable situation and make sense of their precarious conditions.

Inspired by these observations, we want to push the debate on neo-nomadic practices further by studying a case that exemplifies the interplay between self-employed business activities deployed in mobility contexts and experiences of social mobility. Specifically, we build on ethnographic research and in-depth interviews with "people on the move" pursuing self-employed economic activities (formal or informal) in two locations, namely digital nomads in coworking spaces in Barcelona and street vendors in São Paulo. Although

our research participants are currently not living in their countries of origin, few of them define themselves as migrants. Thus, we prefer to use the denomination “people on the move” to recognise them as anchored in neo-nomadic mobility patterns, which involve repeated internal and international moves and uncertainty about the length of stay in their current countries. The authors chose Barcelona and São Paulo because they had previously conducted research independently and had available data on the activities of self-employed people on the move in both locations. Intrigued by the similarities we observed among our research participants in their descriptions of self-employed activity, and interested in connecting these with broader discourses on entrepreneurship and self-reliance, we decided to bring our independent research projects into dialogue and pose the following research question: What is the role of entrepreneurial ideals in the social mobility imaginaries of self-employed people on the move?

While acknowledging that entrepreneurship is a contested notion in many regards (Ogbor; Sandoz et al.), we understand it as both a set of economic/labour practices as well as the active search for a better life through developing self-reliance and self-improvement (Reichenberger; Cook; Mancinelli). By constructing this framework, we aim to contribute to a broader discussion on the subjective and “lived” aspects of social mobility that are still little understood, especially with regard to spatially mobile people. Contrary to positivist analyses of social mobility, our work seeks to shed light on the tensions between people’s self-assessments of their social positions and the structural conditions they face. In doing so, we reveal that seemingly paradoxical situations—i.e., the coexistence of precarity and a sense of upward mobility or improvement—can be explained if we consider the subjective perspectives of “neo-nomadic” individuals.

Theoretical Framework

Neo-nomadism

Nomadism is not a new phenomenon. Throughout human history, people—notably peasants in agricultural societies—have embraced spatial mobility as a strategy to secure livelihoods. In the European context, nomadism has been addressed in the work of the French sociologist Alain Tarrus (“Territoires circulatoires”; *La Mondialisation*), who describes the practices of spatially mobile working-class migrants developing trade networks through informal and illegal channels as “circulation.”

More recently, the word “nomadism” has been applied to more privileged individuals who select mobility as a lifestyle. In this context, studies on neo-nomadism have mainly focused on digital nomads, that is, on location-independent workers who use digital technologies to work while they travel (Cook; Müller; Reichenberger). As a label and identity marker, digital nomadism is associated with constant travel, a rupture with traditional office environments,

and romanticised images of mobility and freedom (Adams; Mancinelli).

Although nomadism has long been a negative-loaded label associated with marginality, neo-nomads are nowadays conceived as paragons within a context that values mobility (Salazar; Salazar and Smart). As scholars have shown (Cresswell; Parviainen), the idea of a right to mobility is a fundamental part of Western citizenship. Moreover, the ability to move has been conceptualised as a form of capital, and therefore as a crucial yet unequally distributed resource for accessing advantages and opportunities (Kaufmann et al.; Moret, "Mobility Capital"; Riaño et al.). In this perspective, mobility is not only a right and a resource but also a cultural and social value that has been instrumentalised in various ways, woven into liberal discourses, and naturalised as an individual property (Parviainen). Furthermore, many authors view geographical movement as a form of social fluidity (Salazar) and have associated it with a sense of individual cosmopolitanism and its defining traits: openness, tolerance, and flexibility (Sheller). Nevertheless, in a world shaped by borders and states, in which sedentariness is still generally seen as the "normal" way of living, engaging in nomadic practices can be thought of as a form of resistance and an attempt to develop alternative lifestyles (Engebriksen).

This review highlights that voluntary spatial mobility is seen as a privilege and social distinction that can be pursued as part of a broader social mobility strategy. At the same time, the very possibility of moving, and the actual conditions in which people move, are largely determined by the position people occupy in social and geographical space (e.g., gender, class, age, education, nationality, available infrastructure, mobility regimes, accessible support structures, etc.) and the strategies they are able to deploy (Riaño et al.). It is therefore interesting to contrast idealised discourses of mobility with the realities that people experience. Put differently, even if spatially mobile individuals face structural forces that limit their options and occupy disadvantageous social positions (at least to social scientists), their conception of mobility may cause them to view their situation in a more positive light.

New Approaches to Experienced Dimensions of Social Mobility

There is limited research on spatially mobile people's experiences of their social positions and (trans)national social structures. In particular, the subjective sense-making processes that people engage in to situate themselves socially are still little understood (Faist et al.). Faist et al. outline the difference between objective social positions and subjective social positionings, but to date, most research on social position has aimed to define "objective" criteria measured by standardised indicators (Duru-Bellat and Kieffer). However, we also find it useful to consider the "subjective" dimensions of how people evaluate their own trajectory. This is particularly important in the case of people on the move engaging in self-employed activities, as both voluntary spatial mobility and entrepreneurial practices have been associated with a willingness to forge new paths (Boese et al.; Cederberg; Plüss) and contest

traditional structures and models of success (D'Andrea; Engebriksen; Forget and Salazar). For example, in her research on digital nomadism, Mancinelli shows that participants legitimise their choice to disengage from sedentary life by valorising minimalism, uncertainty, and risk over material accumulation, stability, and comfort. Classical definitions of social mobility, which typically include criteria such as education, professional prestige, and salary (van den Berg) may therefore not be appropriate for considering people who actively seek alternative lifestyles.

Indeed, a growing body of literature contends that the definitions of social mobility used to evaluate a person's (evolving) position in society do not necessarily match the way these same individuals perceive themselves (Davidai and Wienk; Gugushvili; van den Berg). This research stream has increasingly turned to investigating the lived and experienced dimensions of social mobility and how individuals view their trajectories (Attias-Donfut and Wolff; Duru-Bellat and Kieffer). In her study of Moroccan migrant women in the Netherlands, for example, van den Berg shows that developing a sense of self-reliance, autonomy, and emancipation is crucial for her research participants. Acquiring a driver's license or having the freedom to move without any gender-based restrictions are perceived as ways of "getting ahead" in a context where labour market incorporation may be unattainable because of their age and motherhood (van den Berg).

Such subjective definitions of social mobility should not be seen as opposed to standardised indicators but rather as emic categories that researchers must consider. Examining individuals' (objective) social positions and (subjective) self-positioning produces a better understanding of how social mobility is experienced and encourages researchers to question their own assumptions about the meaning of success. Nevertheless, objective considerations of social mobility remain important for determining the impact of social structures and ideologies on economic life and their influence on various discourses and subjectivities.

Following Boese et al., we therefore understand social mobility as a "social process negotiated relationally, temporally, and spatially" (364): relationally, because notions of "moving up" in the world are grounded in social relationships and contextual to specific social networks and communities; temporally, because these definitions change over time and take into account inter-generational issues (i.e., the lives of people's children); and spatially, because the strategies for achieving social mobility depend on the social spaces where they are deployed. This last aspect is particularly relevant for people on the move.

Entrepreneurship as a Frame for Analysing the Search for a Better Life

The development of positive discourses around entrepreneurship has been understood as a consequence of the evolution of capitalism and used to analyse contemporary transformations and meanings of labour (Amigot Leache and Martínez Sordoni; López and Gómez; Bröckling). Some authors connect the processes of labour outsourcing and the massification of temporary work contracts without labour protections or social benefits with the emergence of “various forms of entrepreneurship and flexible work” (“des formes diverses d’entrepreneuriat et de travail flexible”; our trans.; Lima and Rangel, “La Nouvelle Informalité” 52). In this context, a “knowledge economy” organised around networks and projects (Boltanski and Chiapello) has given rise to normative injunctions that encourage workers to adopt an “entrepreneurial ethos,” defined as the subjective mobilisation of the individual around ideals of autonomy, freedom, and self-realisation through work (Amigot Leache and Martínez Sordoni; Bröckling). Lima and Rangel note that these processes include new requirements of “being flexible and self-enterprising” (“se flexibiliser et se transformer en entrepreneur de soi-même”; our trans.; “La Nouvelle Informalité” 66). Vaunted by institutions such as the European Commission and numerous self-help books, the entrepreneur has become a desirable, praiseworthy model that shapes people’s subjectivities and aspirations (López and Gómez). As demonstrated by the Brazilian anthropologist Rosana Pinheiro-Machado, who for over ten years followed the circulation of Chinese products along the China-Paraguay-Brazil trade route from their production to their distribution by street vendors, subjects legitimise their choice to work in precarious conditions based on this entrepreneurial ethos, desiring to be their own boss and to have control over their projects (Pinheiro-Machado 120). Her work was inspired by the work of Luiz Antonio Machado da Silva, a Brazilian sociologist who identified a shift towards a new culture in which the worker “substitutes the career in a long-term salaried job for individual development” (“substitui a carreira em um emprego assalariado de longo prazo pelo desenvolvimento individual”; our trans.; 105).

In Spanish, two words for entrepreneur exist. *Empresario* refers to a classical and formal form of entrepreneurship, in which a person builds a company and employs others. *Emprendedor*, in contrast, is a much more nebulous concept. It refers to someone who likes to start projects, create, and generate change. It refers to the state of mind of someone who is not afraid to challenge existing conventions and build new structures. Entrepreneurship can thus be understood as a “frame,” a particular way of constructing reality that allows people to make sense of objects and events (Goffman). Within the entrepreneurial frame, individuals find and value a degree of liberty. Inspired by the Spanish term *emprendedor*, we analyse self-employment using this frame across our two case studies, and despite the differences in sociolinguistic context, as we observe that our interviewees actively seek to forge their own pathway outside of salaried work according to a discursive model that promotes independence and responsibility. We therefore understand entrepreneurship as the active search for a better life, with the aim of gaining more autonomy and self-reliance

in neoliberal contexts marked by the increased deregulation and flexibilisation of labour processes (see also Cook; Reichenberger; Mancinelli; Lima and Oliveira).

Methods

This contribution results from placing two separate studies on self-employed people on-the-move of different social backgrounds into conversation.

The first study, by Lorena Izaguirre, was part of a PhD research project on the mobility practices and modes of incorporation of Peruvian migrants in São Paulo, some of whom were involved in garment street-vending. It was carried out across two ethnographic fieldwork sessions in São Paulo in August-October 2014 and between August 2015-January 2016. During fieldwork, Lorena accompanied street vendors in their daily routines in three spaces located in the central area of São Paulo: the pedestrian streets in the city centre, the commercial avenue *25 de Março* and its surroundings, and the *feirinha da madrugada* (“predawn” market) in the “garment district” of Brás. The second study, by Laure Sandoz, was part of a postdoctoral project on the transnational business activities of self-employed digital nomads of diverse nationalities in Barcelona. Laure conducted ethnographic fieldwork in a coworking space, where she regularly worked and participated in the proposed activities between July and September 2019.

Discussing our results from previous analyses of this material, we were struck by the similarities regarding the way our research participants perceived their entrepreneurial activities and connected them with broader notions of self-reliance and self-improvement. This compelled us to dig deeper into the question of how people legitimate their decisions to engage in flexible mobility and work activities, and the interplay between their positive social mobility discourses and practices characterised by a high degree of precarity and uncertainty. We were particularly intrigued by the similarity of narratives between people of different nationalities and social backgrounds (i.e., digital nomads and street vendors) living in different continents (Europe and South America) and experiencing disparate living conditions (from the relatively secure economic situation of the digital nomads to the struggle for sustaining their livelihoods of the street vendors). We used these echoes to interrogate the global social and economic transformations related to the flexibilisation of work in neoliberal contexts (Amigot Leache and Martínez Sordoni; López and Gómez).

As some scholars point out, research on migration and mobility calls for more comparative work (Martiniello). While comparative analysis does not always allow researchers to grasp the complexity of a given case, it does allow them to observe a diversity of situations around specific dimensions of interest (Flick). In such studies, therefore, the selection of cases in the groups is of central importance. For this study, the research participants we compared have in common the fact that they use their ability to move and their transnational connections to pursue self-employed economic activities. They display different degrees of mobility

and settlement, but at some point in their life, they have all experienced (and continue to experience) being in a state of movement without knowing where and when to stop. We thus identify them as set in neo-nomadic mobility patterns. They all also display a strong entrepreneurial ethos, that is, a tendency to favour independent and flexible work over salaried employment (Pinheiro-Machado; Rangel). They regularly mobilised the imaginary of the *empreendedor* in their discourses and used the term in its active form, *emprender* (to start a business, to undertake) during the interviews in Spanish. Their businesses range from informal activities at the margin of legality, such as street-vending, to officially registered companies, but they each tend to adopt an entrepreneurial ethos that blurs the boundaries between the personal and the professional (Machado da Silva). Moreover, in line with this ethos, they value non-conventional ways of operating. Their power to transform existing structures, however, varies greatly depending on their social position within the various environments and risks they navigate.

We secured our research participants through various means. In São Paulo, Lorena regularly visited the three spaces where street vendors work on a daily basis. She contacted street vendors directly while they were working, and accessed other potential interviewees through snowballing. She also met some research participants who registered for Portuguese courses organised by the São Paulo municipality. Fieldwork included ethnographic observations, recorded and non-recorded interviews, and numerous informal conversations. This article draws on a selection of seven semi-structured interviews conducted in Spanish. Reflecting the gender composition of Peruvian migration in São Paulo, men are over-represented in the sample.

In Barcelona, Laure conducted ethnographic observations and numerous informal conversations, as well as nine recorded semi-structured interviews in Spanish and English with coworking-space users, whom she selected using a step-by-step theoretical sampling approach inspired by grounded theory (Glaser and Strauss). Although the people attending the coworking space were on average around 35 years old and came mainly from European and North American countries, Laure actively tried to interview contrasting cases in terms of age and nationality. She also interviewed a similar number of men and women, although men were over-represented within the co-working space. Finally, she was attentive to selecting people at different stages of their business's development to include a diversity of entrepreneurial experiences.

Tables 1 and 2 provide an overview of the main characteristics of the people we consulted for this research through semi-structured interviews. Overall, our research participants can be divided into two main groups: 1) spatially mobile, well-educated (with degrees going from vocational training to a Master's), self-employed workers who rely mainly on digital technologies for their business and use coworking spaces in Barcelona (we refer to them as digital nomads); 2) spatially mobile, less-educated (mostly completed high school education or vocational training), self-employed street vendors who are pursuing informal business projects in São Paulo.

Table 1
Research Participants in Barcelona

Pseudo	Age	Gender	Country of origin	Education level	Current business
Lucy	32	Female	United Kingdom	Master	Translation, proofreading, transcription
Roberto	28	Male	Spain	Vocational training	Event and brand management
Markus	34	Male	Norway	Master	Software development
Fynn	40	Male	New Zealand	Vocational training	Software development
Nieke	40	Female	Denmark	Master	IT project management
Jacky	29	Female	Ecuador	Master	Graphic design
John	58	Male	United States	Bachelor (uncompleted)	IT consulting
Molly	28	Female	United States	Bachelor	Support platform for female entrepreneurs
Wilson	25	Male	United Kingdom	Master	Property technologies

Table 2
Research Participants in São Paulo

Pseudo	Age	Gender	Country of origin	Education level	Current business
Piero	20	Male	Peruvian	High school	Garment street vending
Juan	21	Male	Peruvian	High school	Garment design/street vending
Sheila	20	Female	Peruvian	Vocational training	Garment design/street vending
Robin	21	Male	Peruvian	High school	Garment design/street vending
Carlos	22	Male	Peruvian	High school	Garment street vending
Percy	25	Male	Peruvian	Vocational training	Garment street vending
Franco	21	Male	Peruvian	High school	Garment design/street vending

To analyse our data, we first discussed our previous work on the material, as both case studies had already been thoroughly scrutinised and published as several articles and a PhD thesis. Guided by our main research question—“What is the role of entrepreneurial ideals in the social mobility imaginaries of self-employed people on the move?”—we identified three

sub-themes that we wanted to develop: 1) the meanings that our research participants attribute to their self-employed activity; 2) the way they associate their mobility practices with their self-employed activity; and 3) the extent to which they see their self-employed activity as a means of self-improvement. Each of us reanalysed our data and inductively developed further codes in light of these sub-themes. The following sections build on our discussions after we brought together and reflected on our respective classifications and interpretations.

Findings: Legitimising a Sense of Subjective Social Mobility

Although our research participants come from various countries, have diverse social backgrounds, manage a variety of businesses, and face very different levels of risk (from job insecurity to basic livelihood threats), we observe interesting similarities regarding their motivations to engage in spatially mobile self-employed activities. We found that these motivations revolve around three main categories: the quest for freedom, or the subjective sense of social mobility associated with mastering one's time and choices; the valuation of flexibility, or positive imaginaries of (transnational) spatial mobility; and the desire for personal growth, which can be connected with discourses of self-improvement, self-reliance, and individualisation. In this section, we analyse these discourses with regard to the specificities of our interviewees' social positions and the broader context in which they are embedded, which often (but not always) involves a high level of precarity.

Mastering Time and Choices: Freedom as an Impossible Quest?

Our research participants associated being an *emprededor* with a quest for freedom. As other authors have shown (Cook; Bröckling; Reichenberger; Mancinelli), freedom is an essential feature of the imaginary of the entrepreneur, although the constraints of everyday life and the struggle to make a living in a competitive neoliberal environment limit the possibility of fully freeing themselves from existing structures. This is well illustrated by our two cases.

Among digital nomads, Markus, a software developer from Norway whom Laure met in a coworking space in Barcelona, explains:

It has been a long time since I was only an employee. But from what I remember ... I always wanted something more. ... It was frustrating when I was just working for someone ... Now I can organise my time as I want.

Becoming a freelancer offered Markus the flexibility to choose when and how much to work. Although starting an entrepreneurial project involved renouncing the stability of

a fixed job, he could afford it since, like most of our research participants in Barcelona, he came from a middle- to high-class social background and had safety nets in the form of savings and family support to compensate for the absence of a fixed income and formal labour protections.

In the discourses of our research participants, freedom involved being able to choose which projects to take on. As John, an IT consultant from the United States, says: “I like starting. I like ... novel out of constraints. I like having a clean sheet of paper to work with.” This quest for freedom extended to other areas of his life, as he valued the ability to choose how and where to live. For John, becoming self-employed was part of his wider project to travel as a digital nomad for one year in Asia with his wife before settling in Barcelona.

The flexibility, however, is in many cases an aspiration rather than a reality. Lucy, a British coworking space user in Barcelona who also travelled in Asia while working as an online translator, notes that choosing one’s own projects is easier said than done:

I find it difficult not to work. I find it difficult not to accept work ... And at the beginning, that meant like working really late and working at the weekend and stuff. But now, I always have projects coming in, and so I think those things really worked.

Lucy legitimises her internal obligation to take on work by saying that it has enabled her to support herself financially, and that she now feels in control of and satisfied about her situation. Other people we met, however, struggled with stress and burnout. Molly, an American freelancer who used to manage a web-based software start-up in Barcelona, recalls:

I was essentially my boss, but I was the worst boss ever. I was just the meanest person. I was so mean to myself, I was just so hard on myself. ... I kind of had just a big backlash essentially on my mental health and health in general. I was just really, really, really anxious all the time.

Molly reached a point where she felt so miserable that she decided to quit her start-up and take a consulting job. Nevertheless, during her interview, she framed this negative entrepreneurial experience as a useful lesson that could help her launch a new project on improving the mental health of women entrepreneurs. She feels more confident about pursuing such self-employed opportunities now that her consulting job provides her with a stable income.

While navigating a different set of constraints, street vendors in São Paulo share similar ideals of freedom. The Peruvian street vendors in Lorena’s study mentioned the ability to manage their own time as a main factor in their decision to opt into the urban informal economy. They valued the possibility of choosing when, where, and how many days and hours to work. For instance, Piero, a young street vendor, explains:

If you put your effort in the streets, you go out early, you make money. ... If you want, you don't work; if you want, you work. That's what I like about the streets, but when you are an employee, there is no time to do any of this.

Apart from this autonomy, becoming a street vendor also allowed these participants to escape the hierarchical supervision of an employer, which they experience as a form of freedom. When Lorena asked Juan which option was better—working as a street vendor in the predawn market or as an employee in a shop—he answered:

I think it is better working on the streets, because I mean, when you work for yourself, you know yourself ... you can decide when to rest, when to work, all that, right? But when you work for others, you are always under control, right? You are just like another employee; you have to do what the owner tells you.

Similar to Juan, most of Lorena's interviewees appreciated the flexibility of street vending because it contrasted sharply with their previous employment conditions, which were often marked by exploitation and their employers' failure to respect agreements concerning working hours or salaries. Sheila explains:

I think I am better here. There is not much stress. I work for myself. I don't have to support anyone. I don't have the fear of being late for work, or having my pay check deducted. That's the good thing about your business. I prefer to work on my own.

Therefore, freedom is highly valued despite the clear economic uncertainty characterising street vending in São Paulo. Yet, the lack of a safety net appears to be offset by the (theoretical) possibility of higher profits, since street vending can be (counterintuitively) more lucrative than other formal jobs (Godoy; Izaguirre). Moreover, not having to wait for a pay check at the end of the month is seen as an advantage. For example, Robin claims he is better off street vending in Brazil than he was in Peru because he now has more control over his own money:

[I'm better off] here, because at any time you go out to work, you earn your reais [the Brazilian currency]. You can earn [them] in a minute, in seconds ... But instead in Peru, you have to wait a fixed term to get paid. It is very different because for my job. I control my money ...

Overall, both digital nomads and street vendors seek out freedom through their entrepreneurial ventures. To them, freedom, which they associate with a better professional situation and life, means owning their time, actions, and choices. Nevertheless, as our interviewees show, this freedom comes with constraints associated with their social position within specific environments. If the digital nomads interviewed in Barcelona face time management problems, burnout, and the difficulty of securing satisfying projects, the street

traders interviewed in São Paulo experience a lack of basic social protections and choose to engage in an illegalised independent activity as an alternative to exploitative working conditions. These are striking differences, but for both groups, it is questionable whether any of the interviewees have really managed to achieve their desired state of freedom (on the freedom paradox, see also Cook; Mancinelli; Reichenberger; Rosenfield).

Mobility as Flexibility of the Body and Mind

As discussed earlier, mobility is associated with positive values such as openness, tolerance, and adaptability. Moreover, mobility is a form of capital (Riaño et al.) for those with the ability to move where their personal resources and characteristics are valued or who can creatively draw on their experiences living and working in diverse places.

During our fieldwork, we observed that many of our research participants positively associate their mobility with flexibility, which, according to them, enables them to fulfil their entrepreneurial dream, circumvent constraining social structures, and improve themselves. In fact, as authors like Bröckling have shown, the entrepreneurial self “needs” to be flexible to survive under a fast-moving “project” logic (Bröckling). Flexibility thus involves the disposition to be spatially mobile but also a willingness to constantly adapt to a changing world.

Our research participants actively use their mobility and connections in different places to escape constraining legal structures and access environments favourable to their business. For example, speaking about her experience developing a start-up in Spain, Molly says:

Horrible, horrible, horrible. I'm not building it here. I mean, I know I should and like, this might sound terrible, but I'm not stupid. I'm not gonna ... I'm American, so like, I have the opportunity, legally, to build it in America, which is so much easier.

This attitude is particularly prevalent among the co-working space users in Laure's study for whom spatial mobility meant being able to choose the environments that offered the best economic and living conditions. It is therefore common for them to reside, more or less temporarily, where they enjoy the lifestyle while registering their business in countries with more favourable legal conditions alongside seeking out clients in yet other places that offer higher pay rates.

Beyond economic considerations, several research participants mentioned that they look for places in which their unusual way of living and working will be socially accepted. Markus explains that one of the things he likes about Barcelona is that “here it's more accepted, it's more normal to be an entrepreneur”. Spatial mobility therefore becomes a way to realise personal dreams by finding an environment that offers the best conditions for growth.

Moreover, some research participants see the experience and lessons gleaned through their frequent travel as their main objective, valuing this experience even more than economic growth. For example, Fynn, a developer from New Zealand based in Barcelona, explains:

I never had that perspective that a lot of people have, which is that you should stay in a job for a long time ... My perspective was, if I can work for different clients in different companies, then I'm getting more experiences from different people.

Nevertheless, this highly valued flexibility also involves uncertainties and a lack of protections against exploitative working conditions. This is the dark side of flexibility, which most affects self-employed workers with less capital and for whom mobility can become an economic necessity, particularly in times of crisis. Indeed, most of the people interviewed by Lorena in São Paulo had envisioned the possibility of leaving Brazil for another country, as during the period of fieldwork (2014-2016), Brazil experienced its worst recession in 25 years and street vendors' livelihoods seemed endangered.

For some, the possibility of returning to Peru "with nothing" was unimaginable; they were committed to continuing a neo-nomadic lifestyle in a context of increased precarity. Carlos, for example, when asked by Lorena if he envisioned going back to Peru due to the economic crisis, replies:

Not to Peru. I really don't want to give up. I would rather look for another place, travel a little more around, maybe it is better out there, where I can earn a little more. I would travel there to see how things are.

Interestingly, that Carlos equates returning to Peru with "giving up" is symptomatic of a mindset that has internalised mobility as a social injunction (rather than a choice) and that a "good" migration is a (financially) successful migration. However, in this context, an openness to restarting in a new place is a positive trait because it provides a fresh opportunity to continue learning and discovering different countries. In this line, Percy summarises the best parts of his experience in São Paulo:

That is what I have experienced here: sharing, getting to know other customs, traditions, people from different countries, with different cultures, with different ways of thinking.

To sum up, both digital nomads and street vendors tend to see mobility as positive: it is above all an opportunity to explore other realities and gain diverse experiences. Moreover, mobility can be a means of escaping constraining structures and accessing favourable business environments. However, not everyone can achieve this ideal of mobility, as some people experience strong mobility restrictions due to their nationality, race, and class and

therefore have limited options. Moreover, the values associated with mobility can become a way of rationalising business failures and maintaining a positive view of one's choices and trajectory in a context of increasing precarity.

Developing the Self: Personal Growth through Entrepreneurship

In many cases, being self-employed involves dealing with risk and uncertainty. While some people manage to find a lucrative economic niche or have enough savings and support to sustain themselves, many others struggle to make ends meet. Nevertheless, economic success is in many cases not the most important aspect that our entrepreneurial research participants highlight. Beyond classical markers of social mobility, they note how working for themselves has taught them to become more independent and self-reliant. For them, becoming an *emprendedor* involves not only material conditions but also personal development. It is about reaching a certain degree of confidence and the detachment to learn from failures and deal with the pressure of working under precarious conditions. As Fynn explains:

There's a certain degree of uncertainty as to exactly what I'm gonna be doing, and exactly how much money I'll make. I mean, my goal is not to be rich, my goal is to be able to have a house and then maybe a car and support my partner if she needs it ... I'm trying to learn to trust the situation and move through it, so I can gain a bit more clarity as to what I can offer and where I can go.

Many interviewees mention choosing to work on themselves when they cannot control external conditions. Interestingly, this is even seen by many as a key to success. Jacky, an Ecuadorian designer in Barcelona, considers her work to reflect who she is and how she feels, so improving herself is crucial for delivering value to her clients:

At the end, you make a sale of yourself ... You dedicate yourself to sell yourself, your work, your talent, and it is something very personal.

Jacky stresses how much she has learned since starting her entrepreneurial journey, which she sees as positive despite occasionally precarious working conditions, such as unpaid internships and informal contracts where the client refused to pay. However, self-improvement techniques allow these entrepreneurs to develop self-confidence and a sense of success in spite of adverse socio-economic conditions. For people like Franco, a Peruvian street vendor who did not have access to formal tertiary education, running an informal business not only provides an opportunity to make a living but also to learn and grow. As he claims, "Business is also an education, everyone can educate themselves like this!" Maintaining his optimism throughout, Franco has engaged in multiple business

endeavours, from selling water bottles to selling garments and designing counterfeit goods. This is how he assesses his two years working in São Paulo:

Well, I think that at some point I'm going to find my place here, and I'm going to advance quickly, having patience. I am learning more and more. We are here fighting, accumulating experience, which makes things a little easier, you see more opportunities and all that ...

Overall, our research participants associated self-improvement with a better living situation, even when in adverse contexts. Engaging in continuous learning becomes a core aim, and self-improvement is also connected with learning how to deal with unstable external conditions and keeping calm in the face of risk and precarity.

Discussion and Conclusion: “Moving up” while Dealing with Precarisation

Our findings add to research on how very different groups of people can experience work flexibilisation processes and the hegemony of the entrepreneurial logic (Lima and Rangel, “Informal Work”). Within this broader context, our research participants must manage individualised risks because the regime of flexibilisation, deregulation, and insecurity characterising neoliberalism has “democratised” precarisation (Lorey, *State of Insecurity* 11). Following Lorey, we understand precarisation as modes of governing that emerged with the development of wage labour and capitalist industrial relations, and enable “governing through insecurity” under current neoliberalism (*State of Insecurity* 11). Yet, our research also shows that precarisation has differentiated effects on individuals depending on their social and geographical positions within inequality structures.

In this context of precarisation, our research participants embraced notions of freedom, flexibility, and self-improvement in attempts to improve their lives while taking an unconventional career path. They highly valued these dimensions even though they do not necessarily correspond to traditional markers of social mobility and success.

Apart from *empendedor*, common terms for self-employed people in Spanish-speaking contexts are *autónomo* (Spain) and *trabajador independiente* (Peru). Both invoke the notion of “freedom,” as they highlight autonomy and independence as central values of the labour subject. Studies on entrepreneurship show that self-employed people commonly search for autonomy (Szarucki et al.), as opposed to the “dependency” and “passivity” of waged-labour (Amigot Leache and Martínez Sordoni 46). Yet, these studies also highlight that entrepreneurial ideals exaggerate the independence of individuals while downplaying the constraints they face.

The analysis of our empirical material shows that beyond their quest for freedom, our

research participants face diverse constraints and have access to unequal resources. For Barcelona's well-educated digital nomads, the ideal of absolute freedom in both their personal and professional lives spurs them to pursue entrepreneurial projects and adopt lifestyles marked by mobility and flexibility. Yet, this "freedom" could also manifest as "the freedom to work constantly" (Thompson, "The Digital Nomad Lifestyle"). Moreover, engaging in digital nomadic work relies on possessing "powerful passports" that enable international mobility, a lack of family obligations, and access to alternative sources of income (Thompson, "Digital Nomads"). Becoming a digital nomad thus implies enjoying specific privileges while learning to navigate a competitive economic system. For São Paulo's Peruvian street vendors, who have fewer educational credentials, seeking freedom through self-employment is a pragmatic strategy adopted in reaction to negative past experiences. Although they subjectively value freedom, independence leads in many cases to increased precarisation due to economic and political instabilities (Lima and Rangel, "Informal Work") and an informal labour market characterised by the lack of safety nets and social protections. In both cases, though, a new subject emerges who renounces classical wage labour and resists having their working conditions determined by employers. In these two contrasting groups, the entrepreneurial discourse is very effective in shaping the subjectivities and aspirations of those who embrace it.

Furthermore, neo-nomadic patterns characterise the self-employed activities of our research participants. While digital nomads choose mobility as a lifestyle, capitalising on their privileged nationalities, street vendors use mobility to cope with uncertainty, constantly prospecting new destinations and developing stratagems to secure livelihoods. Flexibility and adaptability are at the core of both groups' practices. For digital nomads, they are associated with a healthy mind and body and the willingness to be open and embrace change. For street vendors, flexibility, and adaptability are a necessity for surviving precarious working conditions. In that sense, spatial mobility can be seen as an injunction rather than an expression of freedom for both groups (though to a different degree). There is thus a thin line between choosing neo-nomadism and being neo-nomadic "by default." For Barcelona's digital nomads, risk-taking primarily involves bad investments of time and money, and it is mitigated by advantages such as the possibility to capitalise on transnational social protection and wage differentials. For Peruvian street vendors, everyday risks involve direct physical threats and crime in the market area, the inability to work on certain days (e.g., bad weather), and urban policies that oppose street trade, which may force them to flee to new places. Our results show that although valorised in both cases and often described in similar terms, spatial mobility nonetheless plays out under very different conditions.

Our results also show that both mobility and self-employment can be understood as entrepreneurial projects of self-development, expression, and actualisation (D'Andrea; Mancinelli). Our interviewees explain that they develop self-confidence through mobility and reshape their career aspirations according to entrepreneurial ideals. These findings

build on previous research addressing the links between mobility practices and accounts of personal development, particularly among youth (Yoon; Anschütz and Mazzucato). Kyong Yoon, for example, shows how the search for one's "true-self" and subjective social mobility go hand in hand, noting that self-development can be fostered by perceptions of upward social mobility, a trend he links to the spread of a particular mode of neoliberal subjectivity. This echoes other authors who have rightly pointed out that the "burden of self-development" rests on "the enterprising subject" (Anagnost 2).

A closer look at the discourses of our research participants reveals that freedom, flexibility, and self-improvement are linked to imaginaries of "doing better" and "moving up," despite the diversity of circumstances and contexts. This indicates that these discourses are collectively grounded in "culturally shared and socially transmitted representational assemblages" (Salazar 770) of what success means in a context of mobility. Yet, paradoxically, perceptions of improvement exist alongside conditions of material precarity and uncertainty. Thus, approaching these imaginaries through the lens of social mobility and its experienced dimensions enables us to achieve a more nuanced understanding of freedom, mobility, and personal growth. Subjective social mobility becomes a tool for understanding how entrepreneurial projects are grounded in specific social contexts (van den Berg) and related to contemporary processes of negotiating and legitimating one's place in society. This is particularly relevant in a context where freedom, and the freedom to move in particular, are inextricably linked to social stratification, and where access to labour protection is unequally distributed across geographical places and social groups.

As pointed out by other authors, there are clear connections between digital nomadism and the ideology of entrepreneurialism (Mancinelli; Cook). Our work extends these findings by showing that this ideology is not limited to the practices of well-educated, middle- to upper-class individuals from richer countries but also applies to working-class people from the South engaging in neo-nomadic practices to secure their livelihoods. If Mancinelli argues that digital nomadism is an opportunistic adaptation to neoliberal transformations (Harvey), our research shows that the new subjectivity produced by entrepreneurial discourses is shared among individuals from different nationalities, social classes, and cultural backgrounds. In that sense, we provide new evidence for how narratives of "moving up" among spatially-mobile self-employed individuals illustrate the ideological match between neo-nomadic and entrepreneurial values. We also show how such narratives legitimate the pernicious idea that precarious living and working conditions are in fact means of attaining greater freedom, self-improvement, and self-realisation (Lorey, "Governmentality and Self-Precarization").

Finally, to delve further into this issue, we encourage more comparative research into the specificities and embodiment of these values across diverse contexts. If entrepreneurship is a powerful discourse that can shape the aspirations and practices of people across the globe, it is important to understand how it materialises under different circumstances and how people adopt, transform, and contest it.

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Competing Interests

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