**The myth of new entrepreneurial populations**

**The explosion of business startups in France: statistical artifact and transformation of the workplace**

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Between 1993 and 2003 the number of business startups annually in France (as defined by the National Institute for Economic Statistics, INSEE) increased by 50%. In 2010, the figure more than doubled compared to 2009. Who are these startup creators? Needless to say, the data have been exploited by a conservative and neoliberal government whose favorite slogans include “the return of the work ethic” and “workers’ empowerment.” In some political and academic circles in France, it is being said that the French are embracing the entrepreneurial spirit.

We can address this phenomenon by considering changing conceptions of work in France. There is talk of the crisis of the welfare state and the reconfiguration of the salaried worker model. The social sciences, particularly economics and sociology, are showing more and more interest in these developments, since French society has long been seen as trending toward salaried employment; self-employment, which had a continuously declining share of the workforce between 1970 and 2000 (from 20% to 10%), has been viewed as marginal or exceptional by comparison. But since then a converse trend has been noted, toward viewing self-employment as an alternative to salaried employment in a context of persistent large-scale unemployment, and sociologists have become interested in atypical forms of work, seeing them as experiments in the different, hybrid kinds of employment status that are now available.

Let us look briefly at how this figure has changed over time. The number of startups was consistently around 210,000 per year between 1993 and 2002 (with a dip between 1994 and 1998), and has grown since then: in 2007 there were 321,000. There is thus said to be a “growth rate of 49% in the annual number of startups over the whole period (1993-2007).”

The paper argument is (first) that we have to have a look at entrepreneurial feature of work instead of measuring the number and characteristic of startup creators. This implies to deconstruct the conceptual frame of entrepreneur as an individual discovering and exploiting opportunities. Second, that there is a political construction or the promotion of self-employment. Third, that far from innovative sectors, the startups creators in France are mainly not innovative and having modest resources and ambitions. Since their number increased, we have to consider entrepreneurial innovation in relation with the characteristics of their different professional worlds.  The paper is divided into four sections. The first section addresses the question of how to measure entrepreneurial activity and why ? I will show that to measure it as a direct function of the number of entrepreneurs (or the number of startup creators) and then to try to relate that measurement to the social profile of those concerned is an approach tied to specific economic theories of entrepreneurship. I will suggest that the question itself is most probably a bad one. All the same, it is a question that has been raised.  The second section reviews the political, social, and regulatory context that has positioned the creation of self-employment as an important parameter of employment policy (introducing confusion between the development of entrepreneurial activity and the promotion of self-employment).  The third section discusses the INSEE SINE survey, including its main features, the questionnaire administered, and the secondary uses and analyses to be derived from its results.  In a final section, drawing on secondary analyses of this database, I will show that a sectoral analysis reveals highly differentiated spheres of entrepreneurship. I will argue that the value of such a quantitative study resides less in its ability to produce an econometric evaluation of government policy (measuring the effectiveness of a particular form of assistance for starting a business, for example) than in its ability to provide the kind of comprehensive typology that can later lead to ethnographic surveys. This suggests that we would benefit from viewing quantitative surveys not so much as instruments for simplifying the real world but rather as tools for qualitative surveys.  The conclusion proposed with respect to the French situation and to the question posed initially (that is, is there a move toward entrepreneurial activity?) is that the data indicate a redistribution of the salaried workforce, characterized by two shifts: salaried employment is becoming more unreliable, while the creation of self-employment is being rendered somewhat less precarious through a series of experimental measures.

**Introduction**

*The explosion of business startups in France: a statistical artifact?*

**Section 1: Using entrepreneurial traits to measure entrepreneurial activity is not the right approach**

*An empirical question linked with theories of entrepreneurship*

*From a model of the entrepreneur to the establishment of a body of quantitative data*

**Section 2: A figure produced by a policy**

*The development of an environment of entrepreneurship activism and legal experimentation*

*Making job transitions secure rather than encouraging entrepreneurial risk*

**Section 3: A national survey on business startups (INSEE-SINE) : its features and econometric uses**

*Using the database to evaluate government policy*

**Section 4: From counting the numbers of startup creators to a typology of the social universe of entrepreneurship**

*The sociographic portrait of the startup creator*

**Provisional conclusion**